

# Nothing is Certain but Death and Taxes

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**Nothing is Certain but Death and Taxes**

To some degree she lived for other people. She wasn't selfless, or really that kind, but her happiness was a performance for them more than for herself.

She cared what they thought and she cared that they thought the chemicals in her brain were working well enough to make her happy, this, she thought, made them happy.

The option of death was, sometimes, a comfort to her. Knowing she had some control and that she could do it if she ever needed to, not that she would.

She wanted to be remembered by those around her but not in any sort of devastating way. Perhaps they could think about her every time it rained. A rainy day was the perfect time for some sadness and nostalgia. Her own rainy days had consisted of similar feelings while she hid under a duvet telling people she was just tired. She didn't want trauma or regret, just a small amount of sadness and nostalgia at her loss.

She wanted to be known for her life, and not her death, but this was easier said than done. Perhaps, in death her life would come out. She would have liked to be remembered by many. But after all the drama fades there are only ever a handful of people who care enough to keep your life with *them*.

This is some of her life, and some of her death, remembered by, *them*. Each chapter forms part of an uncertain story, focusing on one of the characters in her life, from the presumption of innocence.

When somebody dies under suspicious circumstances it is not always clear who did what or why, witnesses and suspects muddle together to form what could be the truth. Nothing is certain.

PART ONE:  
SUSPECTS



**Nothing is Certain but Death and Taxes**

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## Mark

She didn't want him to sit next to her. He could feel it. Or, he could feel something, he told himself it was just because she wanted to relax, to spread herself out.

Tonight was a Monday night, which usually meant Mark would go to bed early, probably after his shower. Of course Julia wouldn't be tired yet, having done nothing all day, so she would lie around on the couch for several more hours, watching TV, until she felt like she could *maybe* try and sleep. This Monday night, however, Mark joined her on the couch. She was watching a silly romantic comedy. Mark teased her about it. She wished he wouldn't.

It was one of those movies where the one half of the relationship cheats on the other, the other leaves them, the cheater realizes they've made a mistake and tries to win them back. The usual. But, there was a twist this time, it was the woman who had cheated on the man. Still, it wasn't fooling Mark. He sat down on the end of Julia's couch, even though there was a whole empty one, with a better view, right next to her. He lifted up her legs and put them on his lap.

"These stories are so clichéd."

She moved her legs from on top of him and scrunched herself up into a ball. "They speak to a lot of people, most people have gone through this, you can't blame them for wanting to watch something where the same thing happens but with a happy ending." She was speaking without looking at him, her eyes fixed on the screen.

"What have most people gone through? Being cheated on?"

"Yes," a pause, "well not you because you've only had two relationships, but I would say most people."

Now he took the blanket she was using and threw the end of it over his legs, "have you?" he asked.

"Sort of."

"What do you mean 'sort of'?"

“I was on the wrong side of the story.” He looked confused for a while, shuffled around under the blanket until his mind clicked and then looked shocked. More than that, he looked hurt, as though she had done it to him.

“It was only the once! With Ben. I would never do that to you.” She looked at him now.

“Tell me the details.” She didn’t want to, not only for her own sake and the image she had of herself but because she knew the more they spoke about it the more he would hurt. But he forced the issue.

She explained. The man she was engaged to not long after breaking up with Ben, Christopher, “well, I had known him for a while, and that was pretty much the catalyst for the end of the marriage. I started hanging out with Christopher and one thing led to another - but it wouldn’t have if Ben and I had actually been happy. I think I loved Christopher, and I don’t think I would have if I had loved Ben.”

And now, she thought, she was with Mark. The man with the boring name, literally it meant a mark, a small annoying thing that nobody wanted on their clothing. She looked over at him. He still looked hurt. Of course he was, he liked things orderly and he liked them to be how he thought they were. He worked in insurance and was the type of guy that was never late for anything, who remembered to put the toilet seat back down after peeing and who always did his taxes well ahead of time. He had been known to say, a good thirty days before, the income tax due date “nothing is certain except for death and taxes,” but, really, he wished everything would be, including his wife.

Julia would roll her eyes at this, she had never handed in anything early in her life. She was somewhat proud of that.

Julia and Mark had been married for almost three years now. They knew almost everything about each other. The good stuff and the bad, whether they wanted to or not. “That’s marriage,” Triks, a friend of Julia’s said to her. Triks had been married twice, divorced twice and knew it all.

Just like Mark thought he knew it all, at least where Julia was concerned.

It was just the two of them, no children, *yet*. But the pressure was on. Well that’s how it felt to Julia who was four years younger than Mark. She felt, that he felt,

that the time to do it was fast approaching. Of course she wasn't certain what he thought because whenever he brought up the subject of children she shot him down. Julia had believed she did want them, that's what most people did, get married, have two point four children, work, retire, etcetera etcetera. And overall she was like most people.

Julia had worked before, nothing fancy, just some secretarial work which is how she had met Mark, her boss had introduced them. Mark had only ever had two girlfriends before that. One of them had broken his heart back when he was twenty-two and he hadn't dated much since. Not just because he had a broken heart but also, more so even, because he was a very awkward man. Julia had had her fair share of relationships before Mark, no more, or no less than was normal, she would say, most of which had ended badly.

They met at her office party and had been married just less than a year later. And here they were, on *their* couch watching movies *together* on a Monday. Mark would have said it was great, most married couples don't do a thing together, especially on a Monday. He did wish she would put her legs on him though. He placed a hand on her calf. Tentatively.

When he had first met Julia, via her boss, his best friend back then, he had tried a similar move. His best friend had told him that "if you put your hand on a woman's thigh and she doesn't move it, it means she's into you,". That night, like all work functions, was stuffy and awkward. But so was Mark and he was also lonely and bored so what did he have to lose? He wouldn't normally put his hand on a woman's thigh but not putting his hand on women's thighs hadn't got him very far either. And maybe Julia was also lonely and bored because when they met she thought, "why not give him a chance?" which was really quite unlike her too, especially after her last relationship, and, so, she left his hand there.

She had been engaged before. And things had ended more than badly. He had run off, with a whole lot of her money, that she had carefully saved, and she had never heard from him again. When she met Mark she was living with friends. Unable to pay her own rent she had sublet her studio apartment.

She no longer worked. It had been Mark's idea, saying she didn't need to work if she didn't want to, and that it might be nice if she was home. She didn't *really* want to work and thought she might take to the whole "homemaker" lifestyle quite well. She imagined herself in the big house Mark would buy for them, planting a vegetable garden, cooking using her own grown vegetables, redecorating, baking, maybe some decoupage. For a while she enjoyed the cooking, or the trying to cook. They had no garden but they did have a beautiful balcony that she had tried to grow herbs on. She had read that herbs were easy and she thought once she had got the hang of that she could move onto vegetables. But she never did get the hang of it.

Soon she was bored of trying to make extravagant meals, they didn't turn out like the pictures in the recipes books and although Mark "oohed and ahed" about them they took too long to make and weren't worth the effort. The decoupage she just couldn't do, it was too finicky and she gave up. The decorating she did like but there were only so many times you could re-decorate a room, even in a flat as big as theirs. She looked around the room they were in now, trying not to make eye contact with Mark, she wondered if it was too soon to repaint? If she changed the colour of the walls then she would have to change the furniture too, to match it. And they could definitely do with another couch, this one was tiny, she felt cramped.

She started cooking more and more pasta dishes that mainly involved a packet of premade sauce and some grated cheese, if Mark was lucky. Although he still "oohed and ahed" just the same he did start cooking dinner more himself. And he seemed to enjoy it which relieved some of the guilt Julia was feeling. Tonight had been a readymade pasta night. Mark had arrived home too late to cook and Julia had already eaten by the time he opened the front door. Her bowl was still on the coffee table in front of her, some of the sauce still on the blanket he kept trying to throw over the two of them, to connect them.

Not many people knew she had been married before, her parents certainly and Mark too, of course. But that was largely it. Afterwards she had thought that marriage had seemed awful, yet looking back, she wasn't sure how awful exactly or, even, if she was remembering it right. She wasn't in contact with many of the people she had known

back then. She had met him, Ben, when she was still in high school. He was a bit older and as soon as she had her matric certificate she was out the door, marrying him six months later, before her nineteenth birthday. They had stayed together for another few years or so. She couldn't point to anything definitively wrong between them, she just thought they were too young, they didn't know what they were doing and they messed it up.

"You were desperate to get out of that boarding school, love, you can't blame yourself," this was what Mark always said on the matter. Julia hadn't had a great upbringing. And she didn't have a great mother, Mark had heard a few stories and met her once before. Julia sometimes wished she hadn't spoken to Mark about her mother. She really wasn't that bad and Mark didn't understand that what she had told him was coming only from her and from a child's perspective, mostly everyone else was fine with her. She tried to avoid talking about it all.

"It was going to happen anyway, we were going to have to end things, we were horrible to each other, Chris just helped things a long, that's all. I mean, I might have been with Ben another three years for all I know, I didn't know how to leave him, it was better that he left me. Not that that way was good either, it was just the only way I knew. I pushed him."

Mark still looked hurt. "I never knew."

"Don't worry about it, it was a long time ago, I said I would never do it to you."

"Why didn't you tell me? We tell each other everything." Julia pulled a face, he was sounding just as clichéd as the woman in the movie, he didn't notice, he was staring down at her legs.

"You still know me, I'm still the same person, it was a long time ago." He looked up and met her eyes, she paused, she had been putting this off but it would change the subject "I should probably tell you this now, my mother is arriving next week. She's staying with us." Julia felt bored and anxious and keen to get out of this conversation, she picked up Mark's hand and moved it off her calf, then she got off the couch, pulling the blanket with her, and went to bed, leaving behind a stunned Mark and a dirty bowl on the table.



## Julia

She had tried them all. The skater, the dopehead, the jock, the drinker (more than once) and, eventually, she settled for the boy-next-door. He wasn't her boy next door but he was someone's and she thought she better take him before they did. Most importantly, he was good to her and he was stable.

He was also a little bit overprotective and a little bit jealous. But Julia didn't mind, much.

For these reasons, she often didn't tell him all about her past. He knew the main things, about her mom and her childhood, the things that could get her, her share of sympathy, the ones where she was the victim. For example, if they were having a fight about how she never cleaned anything she could easily use the story about all the times she had to clean up after her mom after a long night of too many bottles of *Tasenberg*. But today, when she was lying in bed at eleven am and Mark was getting cross with her because he had just noticed that her antidepressant from last night was still lying on the rim of the basin, she held her tongue. She had, in all honesty, just forgotten. They had had people round and she had gone to bed half asleep at twelve thirty. But Mark always got cross about that sort of thing, he didn't want her to "slip" because god-forbid he would have to deal with an emotion from her. He wanted her to take care of herself, properly.

She had her excuse all lined up and ready to go: with the loud music from the dinner party still in her ears and the two glasses of wine she had had on an almost empty stomach, she had been about to put the tablet in her mouth when she had suddenly been overcome with a memory of being in a dingy sports bar with one of her exes pressuring her to pop a pill. And she had decided not to take the antidepressant. But then she had remembered that Mark didn't know she used to take drugs and go to dingy sports bars and she didn't want to add another thing to the list so instead she apologized and put her hand on the soft crotch of his pajama pants as he picked up plates from around the room.

Besides, she had her first piano lesson today and she didn't want him ruining it. She was giving it, not taking it. It was the one thing she felt she was good at and she needed something to be good at, to feel useful. She was pretty sure she wasn't a very good wife, she didn't work, and she wasn't a mother. But she planned to make dinner this evening, after her piano lesson, as a celebration and to say thank you to Mark for all the cooking and cleaning he did. This hadn't come to her naturally. She probably would have left it to him to cook for her tonight, to say well done, but on Tuesday morning when she woke up and saw the pasta bowl still lying on the coffee table from the night before she had been slightly annoyed, only to walk into the kitchen to find all of the washing up from the night before undone. The deal was whoever didn't cook cleaned. And she had cooked. Sort of, mainly *Woolworths* had cooked and she had reheated. She took a photo of the mess and sent it to Mark at work. This had been a mistake and had resulted in a fight where she admitted that he did more cooking *and* more cleaning than she did.

She was tidying up the lounge, the piano was situated there, while Mark was tasked with the passageway, also important as it was the first thing the student would see. She had tried to keep the dinner party to the dining room last night. But things always spilt over and people went where they wanted.

At five to one Julia pulled the gloves off her hands, washed them twice, and went to hover by the door. When the bell rang she forced herself to count to ten, then opened it. On the other side there was a woman in a long purple skirt and purple lipstick, with a small child, maybe about five years old? Julia nodded a "hello" at whom she assumed was the child's mother and then bent down, "hi, I'm Julia! Should we go in and start?" and then, to the mother, "would you like to stay?"

"Well, yes, I'm Tess," she knew she was Tess, she had spoken to her on the phone, she nodded again, "The lesson is for me." Oh. That was fine. She was more than okay with teaching adults. But why was the child there? What would the child do during the lesson? Mark had left to put in some extra hours at the office. Maybe he could watch TV, kids loved TV. But Julia was soon to find out that this kid wasn't allowed to watch TV, "my sister is a bit of a hippy, she's not into them doing that sort of thing," Julia didn't know what her sister had to do with it but gave the child the one

pencil they had in the house and a piece of paper she ripped from the back of one of Mark's ledgers.

They started off okay, Tess was very much a beginner but that was good, it meant Julia could start with the basics which were fairly easy to teach. Unfortunately, the child soon got bored of drawing. He refused to continue because he didn't like the squares on the ledger paper and he wanted more colours. Julia had no more colours and gave him a radio, seeing as he wasn't allowed a TV, which he turned up too loud and drowned out the piano. Then, just as they were mastering a basic octave, he was hungry. The one hour lesson went on for two because of all the interruptions - Julia felt too bad to send Tess away having not learnt a thing and prolonged the session. The woman already had a difficult child no need to make her life worse.

By the time they left Mark was back and she was exhausted. She wasn't used to working but she was proud of herself. She hadn't told Mark of her plans to cook and he was already looking around in the pantry. *Never mind*, she thought.

"What you making?"

"Do we have an anchovies? I want to make a *putanesca*." He said pulling out a tin of tomatoes. She honestly didn't know what they had.

"The first lesson went well, in case you were wondering."

"Oh, um, good. Are they always going to be on the weekends?"

"I'm not sure. But you don't have to leave the house every time."

"It's just the students aren't very good and the noise is quite terrible and we often have people round on a Friday evening and then I have to clean up in a hurry before the first person arrives for the lesson. And that was a long lesson."

"It's been literally *one* lesson and *one* time that you've had to do that, but thank you so much for caring about my career. I've always supported yours." She wasn't really sure she did, she *had* just pulled a page out of his ledger, and she wasn't entirely sure what he did all day but she liked that he liked his job and she liked the money. He didn't talk about it all that much, she expected everyday must be quite similar at an insurance firm.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” She knew he didn’t really. He often said this and he often meant it. She knew she was sensitive but she had been happy only a moment ago and she had wanted to share it with him before it was gone.

Her phone rang and she decided to answer it so as to leave the room, “Hello, I’m James’ mom.”

James? Oh, yes, the naughty child, “Yes, hi Tess.”

“No, not Tess, Tess’ sister. Tess was looking after James for me today,” poor Tess, it hadn’t even been her child and on a Saturday too, “well she told me about the lesson and it sounded great, I was wondering if I could sign up?”

“Oh, yes!” A second client!

“And could I bring James with again? I’m a single mom and I have him on weekends.”

“Oh, yes, sure.” She was slightly less enthused by this. But perhaps her mother could look after him. She would be arriving soon. She looked through the passageway and into the kitchen where Mark was hovering around. She might as well make up with him and tell him the good news. Once Josephine arrived there would be little to celebrate.

## Josephine

She hadn't been to stay at Julia's before. She had been to visit but not to stay. But, given the lengthy period of time she would be in Cape Town she had opted for the cheaper route. Of course she had only said "a few days" to Julia, if she had told her that it could be weeks she would be on edge the whole time she was there. Or she would have said no. Either way it would be awkward and Josephine decided she wanted to avoid all that. For both of their sakes.

The flight had been long. Twenty-two hours and the moment she sat down the man next to her had said "Do you read sci-fi?" and she knew she was in for it. She didn't like strangers at the best of times, her daughter and her had that in common.

They didn't have a great relationship. She could admit that to herself even if to no-one else. If anyone mentioned that it wasn't the best she would get defensive, after all she couldn't think of anyone she knew who had a great relationship with their daughter. Sons *maybe*, daughters no. And theirs was better than a lot of others she had seen. And she had seen quite a few as a nurse. Mainly those that pitched up for the last leg, when their mother's were on their deathbeds and it was too late.

When the man finally fell asleep, after watching three or four movies, probably Star Wars or whatever it was these days, Josephine thought she would have some peace. He kept pausing the movie to ask her questions or flag an airhostess by waving wildly across her. They all thought they were there together, what with him being so chatty and her being too kind to turn away, and it was embarrassing. Not least of all when his head kept rolling onto her shoulder. He *probably has a great relationship with his mother*, thought Josephine, he was just the type.

She was bored, and a little bit anxious, not only about seeing her daughter again, and she just couldn't fall asleep. What would happen if she did? He might spread out even more. She had a few penpals which took up some of her time when she was back home, now that she was retired, they were a good way to pass the time. She took out a pen and tried to think of something nice to write to one of them but her trip had

only just started. There was no news. So, instead, she tried to think of something to say to her daughter when she saw her.

“Hello!” This was the best Julia had.

“Hello, thanks for coming to pick me up, I hope it wasn’t too much effort?” Josephine knew it wouldn’t have been, her daughter didn’t work, but she was trying to be polite, to start things off on a good foot.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, I have been here twice this week, dropping Mark off and all, but it’s really fine.” Josephine held her tongue. She would have to be extra polite for the both of them, she thought to herself.

“How long is Mark gone for?” She was relieved that he wouldn’t be there straight away.

“A few days. How was your trip?”

Josephine was ready for this, it was her “something to say” and she started on the story about the sci-fi enthusiast and how she had even less sleep than was normal on an economy flight.

In general she hated flying, most people do, but the flight from the Florida to Cape Town was a particularly long one with more than one stop on the way *and* she couldn’t even drink the free mini wines to make herself sleepy like everybody else did. Moving to the US had been a big mistake. Julia has stayed behind and finished up high school at a boarding house. Tim, who was five years younger, almost a *laatlammetjie* but not a mistake, had gone with them. Everyone had thought that she had accidentally had Tim, she was thirty-seven at the time which was old back then to be having kids, but she had planned for it – she had always wanted two children. She just couldn’t face going through it all again after Julia, so she had waited a long, long time. After Julia was born was just about the worst time in her life – she had accidentally let this slip once which was not the best way to phrase it with a child like Julia. Julia was very sensitive, even now at the age of thirty-two. Josephine had extremely bad postnatal depression and she had hoped that if she waited long enough she wouldn’t have it when she had her second child. This was not the case. Although slightly better, things had

always been slightly better with Tim until they weren't, the postnatal depression was still very much there.

He made up for it though as a teenager in The States where things got more than slightly worse for him.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, you know how I hate plane food.”

“Well, I was thinking of making us a nice brunch at home, omelets perhaps?”

“Anything but eggs! Please, Julia, we had those awful plane eggs, the powdery ones,” Josephine hadn't eaten them but she had heard the man next to her slurp them up and then tell a long story about an alien pod that she didn't understand but made her feel queasy all the same.

Julia took her bags and they headed towards the car. It had been surprisingly easy to pack up her life in Florida. Always pragmatic she hadn't collected much stuff, only the essentials. The hardest part of it all was giving out her new address to her penpals, convincing them that postage to South Africa wasn't that bad and hoping none of the mail to her old home would arrive after she left.

“How's Tim?” She blurted this out rather abruptly as though she had been holding it in for long enough. She had known this question was coming too. Which is partly why she had come up with other stories to fill the void.

“Fine, same as always.” She wasn't entirely sure how true this was but where Tim was things hardly changed much so she felt somewhat confident in saying it.

She had suspected that Tim was smoking some weed on the side but she hadn't known about the other drugs, hadn't wanted to know either, and by the time she did it was too late. After that her marriage with Trevor had fallen apart and, now, eventually, she had decided to move back home to South Africa. But Julia didn't need to know that just yet. There was nothing in the US left for her apart from a job and she had retired now anyway. At least she had a once a week daughter in Julia, even if they only did the mandatory Sunday night call. She had lost her son a long time ago and now her husband too. She wasn't sure if she really had Julia, or ever had, but it was her last shot.

Stepping into her daughter's flat she could see the same could not be said about her collecting habits as her daughter's. Julia was a hoarder, she couldn't throw anything away, she always held onto nostalgia. She could tell she, or more likely a domestic worker, had tried to clean up for her visit but she knew that if she opened any one of the cupboards in the place it would be filled to the brim. The expensive Steinway in the corner didn't go unnoticed by her eye either. At least it was clean, even if messy.

They sat down and Julia made a pot of coffee.

"Are you not having any?" Josephine asked her daughter as she poured a cup for her.

"Uh, no, it's too late in the afternoon for me, will be up all night if I have now." This was not true, she usually had her antidepressant around now, any earlier and it would make her sleepy throughout the day, having it at this time meant she would get to bed just tired enough, if she was lucky. But it wasn't good to have it with caffeine and better to have it after food. Although her mother knew about her medication, to some degree, she didn't approve, and Julia didn't quite want to bring it up, especially not so early on in the visit, unless it was really necessary, which it almost never was. As a nurse who had seen it all Josephine really didn't think Julia's life experiences warranted any sort of numbing medication.

"So, what would you like to eat then, mom?"

Her mother wasn't listening she was eyeing her shoes, her Christian Louboutins, she followed her gaze. She knew she shouldn't have worn them. They were too high, too flashy, too impractical. But she had gone with her most demure nude ones and she had only wanted to impress her mom.

She nodded towards them, "a Christmas present I bought myself."

"I wish I could afford to buy myself Christmas presents like that," was the only response she got and like that the shoes had turned into a symbol of guilt. She couldn't look down at her own feet. This wasn't unusual. She never had bare feet, if she could help it, she had ugly feet, the toes looked almost like long fingers and when she showered she washed them as quickly as possible and then put them back. The only difference was now they were covered in beautiful, expensive Christian Louboutins, which she had saved for, and she still couldn't look at them. Sure it was from the



allowance Mark gave her but even so. She spoke to them sometimes when it was just the two of them, told them how beautiful they were and they whispered back that they were only there for her. And now she couldn't look at them. The Catholic guilt had always been strong in her.

She could have just asked Mark to buy them for her and he would have, no questions asked, but he always did so much for her, especially around Christmas that she wanted to save him from another pair of expensive shoes. They went shopping together for them, even if she already knew what she wanted she liked to let him help her choose, or pretend too, rather than just giving him a picture of what she wanted and sending him off. Besides there was always the chance, and a high one at that, that he would get the wrong design, or shade, or size. And despite what many people thought there were many shades of nude. Peach, flush, light tan, beige, to name a few. It was very confusing and that wasn't even mentioning the different types of heels and buckles. She did this shopping trip with him to make him feel included but, all the same, she was pretty sure he didn't enjoy it *that* much so she kept it to once a year at Christmas.

And paying for her own shoes meant she got diamond studs from Mark last year instead.

When her mother went for a lie down she slipped her feet out of them and put on a pair of pink slippers Josephine had once crocheted for her.

## Roger

Roger had seen Julia in her Christian Louboutins many times but he doubted whether she had ever seen him even though he worked at the same company as Mark and had done for a few years. Julia sometimes came over to visit Mark for lunch, which Mark seemed to find more irritating than endearing, always taking his work too seriously. Roger didn't understand why. He wished he had someone who would come to visit him. It didn't have to be a fancy woman in Christian Louboutins, anyone would do.

Roger told people he worked in finance but nobody was ever quite interested enough to ask him exactly what he did, except for maybe his boss. He also happened to live two streets away from Mark which meant that about eighty percent of the time they were within five hundred metres of each other. Neither of them enjoyed this.

But the story didn't stop there. The two had a history.

Roger hadn't grown up in the richest of families. To his annoyance they weren't properly poor either so he couldn't really complain about it, but poor enough that he had to put himself through college by working thirty hours a week as a waiter.

The office was one big floor divided up into cubicles that only came up to one's chin which meant if you strained hard enough you could see everybody else and, without trying at all, you could hear them too, and they could hear you.

Roger would be busy transcribing his notes into minutes and trying, even harder, not to look up, when he would hear people speaking loudly on the phone. His job included a lot of stapling and printing and typing of lists and all sorts of boring admin but he didn't mind too much, as long as he could concentrate, he was ambitious and he planned on climbing that ladder all the way to the top. He often heard Mark complaining to his wife on the phone. Mark thought he didn't, he was used to the office being full and no one being able to differentiate between who was saying what, but when it was late and they were the only two there, Roger because he had hours to make

up, Mark because he was a goody two shoes, he heard it all. She didn't like it when he stayed late - that was the complaint the majority of the time. And Roger would think how lucky Mark had it that his beautiful wife was complaining because she wanted to see him more. Mark was born rich and had become richer.

When Roger had been a waiter he always earned the most tips, it didn't matter to the other waiters, they all had to pool the money together and split it at the end of the night, but as a issue of pride it mattered to Roger. Which is why he tried so hard to charm every one of the people who came into that place. Besides, the more tips you earned, the more you could put in your own pocket without the others noticing you were coming up short. His waitering days ended with him drinking away a lot of his earnings but not before he finished college. After college he struggled to find a job and so he stayed in the waitering game about two years longer than he had wanted to. Which didn't help with the drinking. But when he got this job he promised to stop, for his own sake, he couldn't risk it.

This particular Monday night he would not be staying late. He ducked out of the office just as he heard Mark's phone start to ring.

He didn't like how they called recovering alcoholics recovering alcoholics even when they hadn't drunk anything in ten years, surely, he thought, you reach a point where you are fully recovered? He certainly felt that way after he got his first one-year chip. Not so much after the second one-year chip though. He went in to the meeting to receive it, he didn't come that often anymore, he didn't really feel like he needed to, but he thought he would come for this.

He was late and snuck in the back. There was a women with a slight American accent speaking, he didn't recognize her, she was telling a story of how, one day after a big night, she had still gone to work but had to keep running to the bathroom to throw up, she was sure she had alcohol poisoning, she hadn't been able to keep anything down, not even water, for the next twelve hours. But she had had to go to work, she had used up all her sick leave on hangover days and she was much too in denial to go to hospital and have a stomach pump. "And, to make matters worse, I'm a nurse, I should have known better," was how she ended off. He had heard much worse, drunk driving

that had ended in bad accidents, ruined families, abuse, passing out and not remembering what had happened to you when you woke up. That was the one he hated the most, it scared him, not knowing what had happened, what he had done, where the bruises had come from. He had once heard of someone murdering someone else in their sleep, what if that actually happened?

Afterwards they called out the usual “one day”, “one month”, “three months” etc. No one went up for half a year but when they got to one, one full year, he did, he was proud when he took his chip. Then drinks were served, coffee, tea the usual, and doughnuts. Alcoholics loved sugar. It was their new fix, you had to replace the urge to drink with something, especially if you had an addictive personality. For a while he went in for anonymous sex but he didn’t like waking up in an unknown bed, it reminded him too much of his drunk nights. These days he worked. A lot.

“Hello,” it was the American woman, “congratulations” she nodded towards his chip, “I just reached seventeen years the other week.”

He smiled, she thought she was better than him, he could tell. And then he noticed the two doughnuts on her paper plate and the way her wedding ring clung to her skin, finger squishing out on both ends, she hadn’t always been this size. Seventeen years ago that ring had probably fitted much better. He chatted to her a bit. Everyone who had gone up for a chip was with someone, but not him. He had to stand with the strange American woman who was probably only talking to him because she didn’t know anyone else here in Cape Town.

He had no one to share this with. His mom was in denial that he ever even drank socially and after so many years of one night stands he hadn’t really bothered to find a partner.

Normally he didn’t care that he didn’t have a partner, he was young and liked to play the field, but tonight he would have liked to have someone to share it with it, to celebrate. Someone to go somewhere with that wasn’t a grey school hall with plastic chairs that your thighs stuck to so that when you got up to go and get your chip you didn’t embarrassingly take half the chair with you. Someone like Mark’s wife, Julia.

If he called up any of the guys and said he had something to celebrate they wouldn’t care what it was, they would come, but they would want to cheers over beer.

He sometimes thought that was how his drinking got so bad to begin with, he had no one around to help him with it. Even his mother changed the subject and got cross if he ever tried to talk about it. So he would go back to his studio apartment, alone.

## Vishana

Vishana was sitting on a fancy looking art deco inspired chair that she was having a hard time getting out of. It was the way it sloped. She had fallen back into it twice whilst trying to make her escape from Emily. She missed Julia. Julia would have come over to rescue her by now. Vishana still liked Julia despite herself. They used to go over there for dinner parties all the time, they even had a spare key in case Julia or Mark ever got locked out. Now their invitations had stopped but they could hear the parties going on across the road. Which just made Vishana even more suspicious.

She was convinced that Sam was having an affair.

He was always over there. He said he was having piano lessons but Vishana wasn't convinced. Why was he only ever there when she was out taking someone for a run? The first time it had happened she had just got back from taking a new client to the park. She was home earlier than expected, because the client had insisted on giving up after she tried to make him do a pull up on the monkey bars. Sam said he had been over to speak to Mark. And she had believed him.

Late the next morning Julia came knocking on their door. Julia usually woke just before mid-day and Vishana was usually home around then – she didn't have many clients who liked working out at that time in the summer.

“So glad you're home! I'm bored and lonely.” Julia was always saying she was bored so this didn't surprise Vishana much. “Want to go for a run?” But she knew Julia wouldn't.

“What about cake instead?” Vishana sighed. This was all very well for Julia but Vishana couldn't be seen eating chocolate cake in her line of work.

“Coffee?” she compromised, no sugar and black.

They went out for the coffee – Julia insisted she had to go out. It was one of those trendy places where they were the oldest people by ten years, everything was

white and clean and looked a bit like a bathroom, but what could they expect living this side of Cape Town it was that or a made-to-look-grungy grunge-bar.

“So, tell me why you’re lonely?”

“Well, you know me, I’m always lonely, but I’m especially lonely now that Mark is away. I’m thinking of starting to give piano lessons full time. It’s been going quite well part time. It’s about the only thing I can do and that way...” But Vishana wasn’t listening.

“When did Mark leave?”

“Oh, on Tuesday. Business. Apparently important. He didn’t forget to emphasise that as though I don’t do anything important which is *why* I was thinking full time with the piano lessons. I know my mom is here and all but to be honest I would rather be alone than spend all day with her.” She was rambling and Vishana wasn’t listening.

“Today is Thursday.” Was all that Vishana could think of. Which meant that Mark wouldn’t have been there yesterday when Sam went over. Why lie? She wouldn’t have cared if he had gone to see Julia. It would have been a bit weird perhaps given that he only knew who Julia was because she was friends with her and because he quite liked Mark. But not as weird as this. Vishana wasn’t the best at making friends, she put most of her social energy into trying to charm her clients. It was hard to convince someone, nicely, to run to the top of the hill and that they should come back the same time the next day to do it all again. And that they should pay her for it. The rest of the time she spent being hermit with Sam. She liked that they did a lot together but she didn’t want to be codependent. She had found Cape Town to be cliquy when she first arrived and was grateful for Sam but, when Julia moved in across the way and waved at her on her runs she was excited at the prospect of a proper friend. So she let the strange lie of her husband’s go.

Until, one morning after a lovely lie-in in bed with Sam, after which he had gone out to get her coffee, “proper coffee, not homemade stuff” and she had turned around and picked up a book with no worries in the world. But, after awhile, she got tired of lying in bed and went to sit on the balcony with a glass of juice only to catch Sam leaving Julia’s. He did hand her a coffee but it was cold and, when, she asked him

why he was over there he said he had been asking about piano lessons. Which was odd because he had never spoken to her about wanting to play the piano and when he found out, years ago, that her twin sister had been in band in high school he had teased her.

A few days later he told her that he was, indeed, starting piano lessons with Julia. He left to go over while she had pretended to go for a run but actually hid behind the only tree in the Cape Town city bowl, and watched as he crossed the road. She was pretty sure she could hear no piano being played but, at the same time, she couldn't actually hear anything. "Must be bad acoustics" was her conclusion.

Now, it was two weeks later and they were at a dinner party, not Julia's, but one of the few other people who would have her round despite her strict diet: no gluten, no dairy, no carbs, no fats, no peanuts (the peanuts were not a diet thing per say, more an allergy thing). Yet here she was stuck in an uncomfortable chair speaking to Emily.

Everyone was drinking quite a bit, Vishana didn't drink either, well at least not much, people often joked at parties that she was "always the driver, never the drinker" when Sam was throwing back a glass of red wine. One glass of wine: 170 calories; water: 0, was what she thought to that. And that was with one glass and Sam never had "just the one".

She was stuck in the mummies corner with Emily. A neurotic mother of a five year old, one third Irish, one third South Africa and the rest monster. Emily didn't drink either and always gravitated towards Vishana. She didn't drink because she was *still* breastfeeding. She would say "it's extremely healthy for the baby and gives him natural energy." He wasn't a baby and Vishana didn't think he needed more energy either. Sam left her to go over to a loud spoken man and as Vishana turned around Emily was there. Then she had made the mistake of sitting down, she had thought she would need to if she were to get through a conversation with Emily, and now she was stuck.

"It's pretty great that your religion doesn't allow for drinking, means I always have a buddy and, in my opinion, the stuff is poison anyway. May never go back even when I stop breastfeeding."

*If* you ever stop breastfeeding was Vishana's first thought her second was, "You know I'm not Muslim right?"



“Yes, exactly, that’s what I’m saying. You know I’ve never been much of a drinker myself.” Vishana didn’t know that, in fact, what she did know was almost the opposite. She had heard that sweet baby James was the product of a rather drunken night with Emily’s ex-husband. Not that she was judging it was only that she was sick of Emily’s ‘holier than thou’ image.

The discussion continued, or rather Emily did, until she took to nervously glancing at her watch every two minutes. “I hope we eat soon, can’t be up too late.” And Vishana was horrified to realize she felt the same way. When did she start feeling ‘close-to-forty’?

“I’m just going to check when the dinner will be served. Back in a second!”

“Wait!” she couldn’t believe she was calling her back, “please help me up?”

She was just digging into a lettuce salad, sans dressing, in a more upright chair, when Julia’s name came up.

“Talking of parties, that Julia’s a good time isn’t she?” said Charles who had always had a bit of a crush on her and would find some way of bringing Julia into the conversation if he could. Vishana cringed, this was when they would turn to her and someone, probably Charles, would say “What’s happened to her? Why don’t we ever see her anymore?” The obvious answer was that none of them had actually ever been friends with her. They had just met her through Vishana and, once or twice, they had her round to an evening of some sort when Sam couldn’t make it and she didn’t want to go alone. They had only seen the party Julia, never the morose Julia, or the desperate Julia, which was fine, Vishana took all those Julia’s. They were friends and that’s what real friends did. But, now, and this was the answer they wanted, the bit of gossip, Vishana had stopped speaking to her altogether, cut her out completely.

She was smiling broadly, getting ready her reply, something along the lines of “her mother’s down, she’s so busy showing her around, she hasn’t been to Cape Town for a proper stay in years” which was sort-of the truth. Vishana had spotted her mother, although she doubted Julia was still busy showing her around, considering she had been visiting for a few weeks now, by Vishana’s calculation, not to mention she had lived here for forty odd years before immigrating, and as Vishana was so often reminded by

the middle class “nothing ever changed in South Africa.” She was about to say some of this when Sam chipped in, “Oh, she’s around, here and there, she’s actually doing really well, teaching piano lessons.”

Vishana, shocked, looked at Sam but he wasn’t meeting her eyes. She lowered her gaze down to her plate, not wanting any of them to see her face, just as her lettuce was taken away and replaced with something pork-like. She looked up again and met Emily’s outraged glance, she quickly turned away. Had Emily noticed she was upset? She looked again to see who else was gazing at her. Just Emily, but Emily had mistaken Vishana’s annoyance with Sam as being upset over the glazed pork in front of her.

## Josephine

“I want to go to a meeting tomorrow evening.”

“Okay, don’t worry I won’t- I will tell Mark not to worry about cooking for you. Unless you want us to keep you something? I guess that would be best, you said they only serve sugar there?”

“Well, actually, I was wondering if you might want to come with me?”

She had never asked her to go before. Apparently some people did when they reached big milestones. Or when they wanted to apologise to someone. That was one of the twelve steps: apologizing to all those you hurt while you were drinking. Josephine had never apologized to Julia, she thought maybe she really just didn’t remember all those drunken nights she had blacked out and didn’t realize there was anything to apologise for. She wondered if she had apologized to anyone? To their dad, her husband?

She thought of her drinking like she thought of her dad’s depression. Her dad didn’t know why he was depressed. He just was. And her mother didn’t know why she drank. She just did.

“Is it a milestone occasion?” What would it be now, fifteen years? Seventeen? It still didn’t feel that long ago.

“No, I just thought you might want to come along instead of flopping around the house.”

It didn’t matter to Julia why, the fact that her mother had asked her was enough, that in itself was a milestone occasion.

On the way there Julia suggested they get dinner afterwards, somewhere nice but nothing too fancy, “Oh, no, no need, there are always snacks there, and we have last night’s dinner still in the fridge, save your money dear. Or rather Mark’s I should say.” She chuckled. Julia had meant it as a nice treat, to celebrate, this was a big deal for her and she could only assume it must mean something to her mother as well.

Julia had always had a weird relationship to food. When she was a child it was too get as much food as possible. She would eat as quickly as she could to make sure she got the majority of what was on the table. Except if she was eating with Tim - then she would share. They often didn't get much food at home. So at other people's houses she went mad. She was like that one kid in the class who had never been allowed to eat sugar and when they finally got their hands on some chocolate, well that was it. It was different with Tim though. When he was around she often gave a portion of her food to him, or if she was out somewhere and they had free snacks she would wrap them in serviettes and take some home with her for him.

Their mother didn't "believe" in school lunchboxes. At least that's what she told them. Like lunch-boxes were Easter or Hanukkah or something. "I don't *believe* in making school lunch. What a waste of time. All those mini things. A mini *kitkat* and a little sandwich, a tiny carrot and a mini juice box. You're only at school until 14:30. You can eat a proper lunch when you get home." Except they never did. And they were often there a long time past 14:30 waiting for her to pick them up.

The second, and last, time Julia had been to the United States was just after Tim had been arrested. She had gone to see him and support him, to try to help and to make sure her parents were doing a good job. She had gone to the holding cell and bought him some doughnuts. She had been so excited when she saw them at the airport when she landed: real, over the top, highly decorated, highly fattening American doughnuts, just like in the movies. She had bought a whole box.

Unfortunately the officer on duty had told her they would have to take a knife to them to make sure nothing was smuggled in there. They stabbed them up until they looked completely unappetizing.

Tim still ate them though. She even had some.

They didn't sit in a circle like in the movies, they sat in a hall on cheap chairs all facing the front. One person, a woman named Sally, introduced the speakers and sort of ran the thing. There was a key speaker and then the floor was opened up to anyone who wanted to speak. All the stories were horrific, they included bankruptcy, divorce, abuse, all sorts. Julia suddenly felt lucky. Her experience hadn't been nearly this bad.

Perhaps that was why her mother had bought her here? To show her that. Josephine sat like a statue listening and clapping when it was appropriate. Julia tried very hard not to cry. Her mother had always seen crying as a weakness and she didn't want to embarrass her. She wanted to be invited back if her mom wanted her there again. After about eighty minutes Sally asked if anyone else would like to speak before she closed the meeting.

No one did. Julia was surprised – she had thought that her mother had invited her because she wanted to say something. But, she realised, she was also slightly relieved. They all scraped back their chairs and Josephine led her to a tin of Ricoffy and a giant urn. Sally came up to them and Josephine started a long chat, it didn't look like she was going to introduce her daughter so Julia wandered over to the doughnuts. She picked a chocolate one with pink sprinkles and took a big bite.

Her mother walked back to her, “Terrible woman that.”

“Who? Sally?”

“Yes, she's been here for years, since before we left, thinks she runs the place, forgot how annoying she is. Luckily Louise usually does the meetings but unluckily she's off sick so Sally's back in the front seat where she likes it. Too busy acting boss to care about any of the people she's meant to sponsor. She's been here much too long, she needs to move on, find something else, but these meetings are all she has going in her life. Without them she would probably turn back to drinking.” But wasn't that the point of the meetings anyway? Thought Julia.

Julia suddenly had a memory of someone called Sally way back and how she never answered her phone. Was this Sally her mother's sponsor? She seemed nice enough to Julia, too much pink, lipstick, shirt, shoes, but nice enough all the same.

“Let's go.”

“What?” Julia hadn't even finished her doughnut and it was surprisingly good. The sprinkles reminded her of Sally's lipstick. “I wanted to meet your friends.”

“We will, we will.” She dragged Julia, but not before she could grab another doughnut, out and along the hallway until they reached another room. Josephine peered through the window, “Good.” She opened the door and Julia saw a much smaller group of people huddled around some celery sticks.

“Overeaters anonymous? Why are we here?” she was trying to hide her doughnut while her mother headed towards a rather hefty man. She turned and glared at her daughter pointing to the blackboard. On there was written “Bible Group” and a verse from Psalms.

“Julia, this is Paul.”

“Hello, nice to meet you,” and turning back to her mother, “so this isn’t over eaters anonymous?”

“No. Shh now.”

“Well I had assumed, the celery and the...” Her mother was glaring at her. She looked elsewhere, avoiding her gaze, she landed on Paul’s bulging tummy, and then some biscuits hidden away behind another urn and tin of Ricoffy. She started slinking over.

“Would you like a biscuit? I always hide the good ones away otherwise they go too fast. People can fill up on the vegetables first.” This from a kind stranger.

“Hmm, yes, so this is over right? Or are we catching you during intermission?” Julia was scared her mother had tricked her into a bible class.

It turned out it was over but that didn’t mean Julia got to go home. She stood there for at least half an hour half listening to Josephine and Paul speaking. Half zoning out. Until she noticed her mother touching Paul’s arm. She was horrified. Josephine never touched anyone. She didn’t know what affection was. To make matters worse Paul let her hand linger there, not moving away.

“That class isn’t Catholic right?”

“No, it’s not Catholic, it’s non-denominational.” With her mother there had always been Catholic and protestant, no overlap. “Catholics don’t go to things like this, we have church, proper church and prayer, none of this airy fairy sitting around eating celery.”

“Oh, right. So Paul’s not Catholic.” If Paul wasn’t Catholic Julia could breathe a sigh of relief.

“Your father isn’t Catholic either.”

“Yes, he is.”

“No, he only went as far as his First Holy Communion. He never had Confirmation.”

“Oh.”

## Faith

She was still convinced that the main reason Mark had broken up with her was because she wanted him to marry her before she would sleep with him. I mean, she had once or twice, but she had always felt very guilty about it afterwards. She laughed at that sometimes now, she couldn't even remember the last time she had been to church. Perhaps it had been a power thing or, maybe, it had been for her mother. She had baptized her son for her mother.

Her mother had always held onto her religion. She may not have money or romantic love but she had religion. And Faith, she had faith.

Her mother had been a domestic worker in an affluent suburb. The same suburb where Mark had grown up. She and her mother had stayed in the granny flat in the back garden of her employee's house. They had told her to feel at home but she never did. When their children were playing outside she would always run in and hide, giving them their space. Her mother had named her Faith and had taken on the name Grace for herself even though her real name, Thuli, could not have been that hard for the rest of the suburb to learn.

She didn't really care that much when he decided on Julia rather than her. At least she wouldn't have if everyone else hadn't made such a fuss and told her how sorry they all felt for her. Weren't there better people to feel sorry for than her? Was her life really so sad? Did they think she couldn't do any better?

Well, it was many years later and she had done better.

Still, when she saw the advert for a piano teacher in a preschool newsletter for a Julia Walters she had been curious. So curious that she had phoned her up and asked if she did adult lessons. She said she did and sounded very enthusiastic, too enthusiastic, almost desperate. While Faith felt disappointed that she hadn't even recognized her name and Faith had purposefully given her maiden name.



She had left work a half hour early to go over for her piano lesson – it didn't matter she was a junior associate at the law firm and she was always working overtime. She didn't want to go on the weekends, she was scared she might run into Mark, but there was no way he would be home this early in the week, he had always been addicted to work. Just like she was.

Julia and Mark's flat was nice, not as nice as hers, or at least not as nice as hers had been before the baby. They lived in the city bowl, which was a good thing for Faith because her office was around there too. It had a penthouse feel to it without actually being a penthouse. And it was a double story flat. Unusual. Before looking at the family photos on the mantelpiece Faith knew that no children lived here.

"Nice place, what does your husband do?" She knew it was rude but it was out of her mouth before she could stop herself. Her mother would be ashamed of her.

"He's works in insurance." She sounded slightly unsure but it made sense to Faith. He had studied numbers and things in that line of work back when they were together and it was unlike Mark to change. The only thing he ever changed his mind about was her. But, then again, it was never fully set in the first place.

She wanted to know more. She tried snooping but Julia was following her around asking her about why she wanted to learn the piano. Faith asked her for a glass of water so that she would disappear. Julia clearly didn't recognize her but Faith recognized Julia, she was just as beautiful as before, with her waify damsel in distress look and big doe eyes. There were wedding pictures on the mantelpiece.

"You're doing really well." She said warmly and genuinely and Faith admitted to her that she had actually taken piano in school although she hadn't played in years. She looked towards the windowsill, her eyes fell on a statuette of the Virgin Mary she hadn't noticed earlier.

"Sorry, that's my mom's."

"That's okay, my mom is like that too."

Despite her best efforts, by the time the lesson had come to an end Faith actually sort of liked Julia. They had gone over time and she hadn't even noticed. She got home late. There was some concert going on and a lot more traffic than she had

banked on. When she got home her child was crying and Claire was pacing up and down looking close to tears herself. “What’s going on?”

“He’s hungry.”

Faith looked up at Claire, she was about to ask her why he hadn’t fed the child then but looking at her face she thought better of it, “thank you for picking him up from playschool,” she said as she took him from Claire who was holding him out like he was a mouldy loaf of bread. Claire wasn’t very maternal. She loved their son, dearly, she just wasn’t very affectionate. But she wasn’t very affectionate with anyone. That was just her way.

They had adopted, not because they were women, but because neither of them wanted to be pregnant and go through labour, they had their separate reasons for this, and because it was easier than choosing which of them would be the biological mother. That and the fact that they were so many children who already needed a home. Or so Claire said.

Claire had an aversion to pregnancy, she liked what came from it, just not process. Her father had been a gynecologist and once, when he had had Claire for the day and been called to deliver a baby he had bought her with him. She had sat in the delivery room, watching it all, everyone too busy to really notice her. Faith had her own, very different, reasons for this.

“Where were you anyway?”

“Piano lesson, I told you I would be late.”

Claire had a look on her face that read, “not this late” and replied “but we *have* a piano and you never use it.”

“Precisely.” They had taken it from Claire’s mom with vague notions that their child would grow up in a musical household despite neither of them having much musical knowledge. Claire had done piano up until high school, like most upper middle class children, and Faith too had played for a while at school because the children of the upper middle class family that her mother had worked for had piano lessons and their parents, who paid for Faith’s schooling, didn’t want her to feel left out.

It didn’t help. Faith didn’t so much feel left out as she felt awkward. Most people at school knew her mother was the *maid* to the McKenzie girls and, even though

she was pretty sure everyone already knew, she still wouldn't have people over. When the sisters had friends round she always hid, scared they might see her. When she heard her mom humming in the kitchen she got anxious that they might see her mother in her uniform.

She was told the house was hers but she would always run inside if she was using the swing and one of the girls wanted it and when they played together she felt embarrassed with her cheap doll from Shoprite and even more embarrassed when the sisters' mom bought her a fancy *Baby Born* doll that Christmas.

Faith cooked macaroni and cheese – it was about the only meal that all three of them would eat. Sometimes she missed the days when she lived alone in her tiny bachelor apartment and experimented with weird foods. Now Claire was a vegetarian and Angus wouldn't touch anything with more than two ingredients.

She looked down in dismay as they sat around the table to eat. It was way after Angus' bedtime and he was full of angst, the place was a mess, she couldn't even add bacon to this dull dish and Claire was in a mood. After dinner she offered ice-cream, only Angus was interested, and she immediately regretted it – giving him all that sugar was not going to do any of them good.

“Let's just go to bed – we can clean up tomorrow.”

“You mean *I* can clean up.”

“Well I did cook.” Dammit, wrong thing to say, she was regretting a lot tonight. She knew what was to come, a long lecture about how she didn't value Claire's job and just because she worked longer hours than anyone on the planet didn't mean that Claire was there to clean up after her, etcetera.

“You know just because you work longer hours than anyone on the planet doesn't mean – ah fuck it, I'm too tired to fight.”

## Julia

“What’s wrong?” Julia was looking at Mark’s long face. Her initial thought was something had gone wrong at work. He was never home this early. Her second was annoyance that he was back this early - it hadn’t given her enough time to get ready.

“Did you hear about the body in the park?”

“What body? What park?”

“This park – how did you not hear about it? Did you leave the house at all?”

Guilty. That’s how she felt. That’s how she always felt when Mark came home from work and she had been inside all day in her pajamas and thirty minutes before he was due home she would run upstairs and doll herself up. He had once remarked on how fresh and clean she smelt even at the end of the day. A few times she had messed up and he had come home early and found her napping on the couch – she had had to pretend she was sick which wasn’t too bad because she got a lot a favours coming her way when she was “sick”. But there are only so many times one can pretend to be sick in a year without worrying other people.

Of course depression is a sickness but neither of them saw it that way. It wasn’t a real sickness, not like the flu, not something you could clearly see.

“I didn’t have to – my clients came here.” Which was true. Although it had been only two of them. At around lunch time she had almost left the house when she had become rather hungry but weighing it up eating stale toast with marmite seemed easier than going to the store.

“Do you mean our park? The dog park?” They didn’t have a dog but they did, when they occasionally went on walks, go to that park and everyone else used it as a dog park, except for Vishana who ran around it daily.

“Yes. There was a boy, hanging from a tree there this morning. It was awful. All the traffic was backed up so I had to sit in front of it for ages. And, on the way

home it was still there! They hadn't moved him – police were still investigating but it's clearly a suicide. So selfish of him, to do it there, in the open, poor family.”

“That's awful for you... and the family, of course. Could you see it all clearly from the car? I sometimes think it's quite brave, you know to actually do it, to go through with it.”

“It's attention seeking – out in the open. And it's not fair on everyone else.”

“Attention seeking? What does he care about attention – he's dead. He was in pain. It was about the pain.”

Mark walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and said “there's nothing in here except for mouldy carrots.” He didn't throw the carrots out. Just closed the fridge door again.

“Want to go out? Or order in?” She wouldn't offer him toast with marmite – he wasn't that sort of a guy, he would make some comment about it reminding him of his school boy lunches.

“Nah, I don't feel like it.”

“Okay, I will go to the shops.”

“Don't worry, I will do it.” Which was fine by Julia. She got straight back into her pajamas and made herself some more toast – it would be hours before they ate if Mark was cooking, especially if he was walking around the shops in a huff. She was feeling a bit sorry for herself. She always did when anyone spoke about suicide. She had attempted to commit suicide once. Or she had attempted to attempt to do it. She really hadn't done much other than make one horizontal cut across her wrist - how was she to know they were meant to be vertical? But even if she had got it the right way round it still wouldn't have been deep enough to cause her to bleed out. She couldn't fully commit, not because she wasn't selfish enough but because she was too scared. She didn't like to think about it but sometimes she couldn't help it.

When Mark came back he was more cheery. “Here – I bought you some Ultramel. Let me get that pot on the boil.” This was, perhaps, a peace offering.

“Oh great – thanks!” He was watching her. She got out a bowl and spoon, and moved into the lounge. She took a spoonful and shoved it into her mouth, swallowed, and, when she was sure he was back to chopping onions she went to

the window and poured it into an almost empty flowerbed outside on the balcony. Vile stuff. But she still pretended to like it.

After enough time had passed to pretend she had eaten the custard she went back into the kitchen. She had put “CHOCOLATE” in bold on the shopping list and underlined it. She started sorting through the packets of groceries, putting things away. “Where is the chocolate?”

“I didn’t get you any, you eat way too much junk food,” said the man who had just bought her Ultramel, but that was different they had a history with Ultramel, a cute one, she knew that.

“I got you almonds as a new snack food.” But she hated almonds. Everyone, mainly Vishana, was always going on about how healthy they were but they didn’t taste that great and they had the highest percentage of fat out of all food. If she was going to eat something so fattening she would rather eat something that tasted good, like chocolate. It was all very well for Vishana who didn’t actually have to eat them because of nut allergy. She disdainfully took the bag Mark was holding out and looked at the label, they weren’t even the salted kind.

She didn’t want to continue talking to Mark in case he brought up the body again or tried to give her a piece of raw broccoli. Mark gave her a look as she left and she reluctantly took the almonds with her. Her mother was out. Probably with the non-Catholic man although she would never say. Apparently they had met online and written letters to each other before she came down to South Africa. This was another clue backing up her theory that after three weeks here her mother was not on a holiday but actually in the process of leaving her father. It had been rocky for a while and Julia knew that, she wasn’t naive about her parents’ relationship, but still, her mother should say something, not that she ever really spoke about anything important.

She wandered up to her bedroom and lay down. On her side table was a small ID picture of Tim. She could write to Tim. She knew she should. Because Tim was in a US jail she obviously couldn’t visit him and he wasn’t allowed long distance phone calls which left only letters. The average letter took at least six weeks to arrive from The States to Cape Town so they were both forever living in each other’s pasts. Generally, by the time she got a reply from Tim it had been three months, six weeks for

her letter to arrive and another few for him to respond and his to arrive here, which meant she often had to try really hard to remember what it was that she had said that he was commenting on. She was developing quite a good long-term memory.

This time, however, it was easier to remember, this was big news that she was replying to. Because Tim was not a citizen of the United States he had been made to wear an orange jumpsuit, like a stereotype of a prisoner second only to black and white stripes. But they were now allowing him to swap over to navy like the rest of the inmates. It was quite a big deal. He had really stuck out in his orange, there were only three others in the colour, he had sort of stuck out anyway because he was such a big guy. That, however, was maybe a good thing in jail. She would start the letter congratulating him on his new colours. And then what? Tim liked to know the gossip even though he didn't know the people here anymore. She wouldn't tell him about their parents' relationship that would only cause undue stress and she wasn't even sure about it yet. But nothing much else had happened. There were her piano lessons that she was proud of, Vishana was being a bit strange, and her mother was here. That would be easy to write about, there was so much to complain about with her here, even without mentioning their father.

Julia was fifteen and Tim ten when her mom and dad had decided to move. Neither of her parents had had a tertiary education. Her mom had trained to be a nurse and her dad was one of those lucky people who got a relatively okay job despite his lack of qualifications – the type of job that was common amongst white men during apartheid. But, having two children was expensive and the two were never quite as well off as they would have liked. So, when Josephine was offered a really good nursing job over there they packed their bags and went. Leaving Julia behind in boarding school – she was too old and settled to go this close to matric – and taking Tim with – he was too young to stay. He soon got into drugs. Julia knew he smoked weed but, like her mother, that was about the extent of it. Josephine blamed the public school system and Julia blamed Josephine for moving him to The States, and away from her, in the first place. That and the fact that her mother was an alcoholic and an absentee parent.

The point of her staying behind was supposedly because she was settled and doing well and her father really wanted her to go to university – to have the education

he never did. Her whole family leaving her behind, however, did quite a bit in unsettling her.

She was in Grenfell boarding house – one known for the rowdy girls. Why they put all the rowdy girls into one house didn't make sense, but they did, in just the same way that all the studious girls were in Brixton. And all the girly-girly in Milner. Or maybe it was the house that made them rowdy. Grenfell was the oldest house and it had too many stairs, too many levels and places to hide with big windows that were easy to open and jump out of.

But there was a piano that she enjoyed. She would play it loudly and the other girls would dance around and sing until they were told off and they would run back up the stairs, too fast for the boarding mistress to catch up with them.

She shared a room with three other girls – you got to share with only one other from grade eleven onwards – and they used to break all the rules they could. At first Julia only took part in the breaking of the no cell phones after lights out rule, then the lights out rule, then the weekend curfews and then the sneaking out.

On weekends some of the girls went home and others went to stay over at their friends who were day learners. Julia couldn't go home on the weekends but she would get the day girls to sign her out and then go off to parties – with or, often, without the girl whose house she was meant to be staying at. It didn't matter to her because she wouldn't be back in time to sleep much anyway.

Which is how she met Ben. He was older which was convenient because it meant he could drive her around. And she could get him to sign her out on weekends. Almost like a library book she used to think, expect that the fine for returning her late on a Sunday evening was detention for her and nothing more than a strong look for Ben.

Ben still lived with his mother. Which was understandable given that he was only twenty. It also meant that he had a lot of disposable income from his retail job which he could use to take Julia out on the town almost as often as she wanted. She thought his retail job was great. He got to sit around in a store all day selling t-shirts and she got to use his employee discount.



She couldn't wait to finish school and get a job so that she could buy her own stuff and not live in a room with three other girls. She never went to university although she did get in for a degree in music, after her father had forced her to apply.

She would write to Tim about the piano lessons and go from there. Perhaps she could leave her mother out of it. Her eye caught the unsalted almonds. When she was in junior school her music teacher would reward her with chocolate coated nuts - one for every answer she got right. She tried an unsalted almond. And, as she wrote, she found her hand reaching for them automatically. They were definitely not as good as chocolate, but they kept her appetite sated, she almost wrote this in her letter to Tim, "As I'm writing this I'm eating these awful nuts Mark bought me," but she scratched it out. She was sure whatever he was eating was much worse.

## Faith

Most people considered Faith a vegetarian mainly because Claire told everyone that her family lived a “meat free lifestyle”. This was not by Faith’s choice or, probably Angus’. She was scared the poor boy would grow up deficient between Claire not cooking anything with any iron in it and Faith only cooking easy carby things because she hadn’t learnt how to cook without meat and she was sick of legumes. Sometimes she slipped Angus pieces of *droewors* and he seemed to like it, but Angus would eat a lot of weird stuff as well, including pieces of paper and old socks, so it was hard to tell.

When her mother came over she would look at Angus and say, “that child needs to be fed properly, is he getting any meat?” and Faith would roll her eyes at this if they were alone, or, if Claire was there, she would say something like, “You can get just as much protein from a well balanced vegetarian meal, here, eat your lentil bake.” But he was awfully thin for a toddler. In her experience toddlers were chubby and when the closed their arms in on themselves you were meant to see rolls of fat with elbows that had no definition.

*Biltong* and *droewors* were her go to meats. Sometimes, when she had a craving, she would secretly buy them. It was the easiest because they didn’t have to be cooked so there was less chance Claire would know. Once she bought a double beef burger and ate it in her car at work. Then she spent the rest of the day worrying the car would smell like meat and trying to find a good time to throw the wrapper away and hide the evidence.

When Faith went back for her piano lesson with Julia she was eating both a stick of *biltong* from a bag and a handful of nuts and holding them out to her. Their domestic worker was there. Julia acted almost scared of her. Moving out of her way and cleaning up things as she moved. It was as though she felt guilty about the mess she made, and had someone else clean up, but not guilty enough to truly do anything substantial about it. Faith looked at each hand and then took the *biltong*.

She had always thought Mark was from a different world to her. She had once heard him complaining that his visa for Europe was taking too long to get there in the same conversation that his mother's gardener was talking about trying to get a work permit. She had met him in university. She had always sort of known him because his family owned a house in the road where she lived. Once or twice she had seen him ride his bicycle around and the girls' mother was friendly with his mother. That's how they got together really, he recognized her at a party. If he had been any cooler she doubted he would have bothered speaking to the girl whose mother worked in his street. But he had been standing alone at a party looking lost until he saw her.

She went to his graduation ball with him, when they still had things like that, she looked around the house and wondered if there was an album somewhere stored away with pictures. Had Julia ever seen them? Had they not meant all that much to her? They couldn't have really because here she was, sitting with her, and she didn't recognize her as she tried to learn a new song. And if Julia hadn't seen them then maybe Faith didn't mean all that much to Mark either, she thought. Julia's stomach was rumbling, loudly, and she had the feeling she had only eaten those nuts to keep the starvation at bay. The noise was distracting and almost louder than the piano. She closed it. She couldn't concentrate anyway. She was distracted by their wedding photo on the mantelpiece and another one of the two of them away on a holiday somewhere beachy. Julia was wearing a turquoise bikini in it and she had not an ounce of fat. Not to mention her hair, which showed no signs of being near sand or salt water.

"Does your husband ever get jealous?"

"What?"

"Sorry, I'm just thinking aloud, I probably shouldn't have asked. I don't know you. You're my piano teacher. I *pay* you once a week to let me into your house and play piano." She emphasised the word 'pay', she was the one with the power here. Julia was staring at the closed piano cover and she found herself continuing in her silence, "It's just I always get jealous when my wife brings up her exes but if I bring up mine she couldn't care less. She says she's not the jealous type, but surely if she really cared about me she would be jealous of me talking about past lovers?"

Julia looked a little bit taken aback but, to her credit, she went with it, and “He does actually Quite jealous, but I think it might have more to do with how many people I’ve been with and how few he has, than anything else. I don’t think it means he cares more, just that he’s more possessive... Not that I’m saying you are possessive.”

Faith was thinking back to all the little notes she sometimes found around the house, in books and things, from Claire’s exes. She hated those and she wondered if there were any traces of her left in Mark’s life? Perhaps in this house somewhere.

“And you? Do you get jealous?”

“Um, no I guess not really, Mark, that’s my husband, hasn’t really had many girlfriends, just me, someone in university and one other short lived thing. I think the university one was the most serious but even that wasn’t too much of a big deal, they were so young.”

“Oh.” It looked like nobody cared who Faith had dated, not Claire, not Julia and not even Mark. “You would think though, that a guy you had a child with would make your new partner jealous. Or that he would at least remember you.” She was thinking out loud.

Julia wasn’t looking at Faith, instead she was looking at the photo on her keychain that were lying on the table next to them. Faith picked up the keys and Julia’s eyes moved to meet hers.

“I should go.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But your husband will be home soon and I’m sure you have to... get things ready.” This sounded old-fashioned and sexist but she was lost for an excuse and she didn’t want to be there when Mark got back.

“No. He has a meeting and my mother is at church tonight. Have a drink with me – I can’t drink when she’s here.” She got up and moved towards the door. “Tell me about the baby?”

To begin with she was just being kind, answering Faith’s questions, but she liked her, and when she left she would be lonely and bored once more. Faith followed her into the kitchen where she got out a bottle and then hovered a little. The domestic worker was in there washing up and Faith could see Julia was trying to work out the

best way to reach the glasses above the sink without disturbing her. She put the bottle down, for now, and walked to the fridge. “Would you like some leftover lamb? It’s cold but it’s good,” she saw a look on Faith’s face, “Oh, sorry, do you eat meat?” she had already forgotten about the *biltong*, “I have some carrots somewhere... and maybe some hummus.” She stuck her arm deep into the back of the fridge. There was no way Faith was going to eat whatever it was she was trying to pull out of there.

“I will eat the lamb. I had a baby with my wife. And with my ex. I still have the baby with my wife. Not the one with my ex.”

Julia hadn’t asked but she replied “same,” and pushed something brown-ish towards Faith, it turned out she did have hummus in the fridge, only its expiry date was from three months ago, she continued “well sort of, I was pregnant once. And my husband *really* wants a baby.”

This piece of news about Mark shocked Faith more than the food in front of her. She reached out for the lamb.

Claire’s main reason for adopting was that she had been traumatized from a young age about the whole going into labour thing. She pretended it was because “there are enough children in the world without homes” but Faith knew it also had to do with her childhood. Claire was all about saving the world with everything she did, saving the children through adoption, saving the animals through diet, saving the planet through their five different recycling bins at home. Even in their old flat where their kitchen had been about the size of a dining room table they had still found room for five different bins.

When Claire was about eight her father had been tasked with picking her up from school. Her mom was up in Joburg visiting her own mother who had cancer. Her dad was about forty minutes late to pick up Claire which to an eight year old Claire signaled she have been forgotten forever. When he did get there she promptly went from crying about being neglected to sulking that her dad wasn’t more apologetic.

Little did she know her day was about to get a lot worse. Her dad had to rush to the hospital to deliver a baby and there was no time to drop Claire at home first. Even if there had been, there was no one at home to look after her. Claire’s father had been

given a strong reprimand the last time he had left Claire alone. Her mom had been away again and her dad had taken her with to a colleague's braai. When they had got there Claire had gone straight to the pool. On Sunday evening when her mother flew back and they were sitting around the dinner table and her mother asked her, "So how was your weekend alone with Daddy?" Claire had replied that it was great – that she had even been allowed to swim in Eric's pool alone.

Since then her dad had been very careful not to leave her alone for a minute. He had even been told to go into the lady's toilets with her. Claire hadn't demanded the bathroom in a public place yet, but her father was in constant worry that she might. Whenever she asked for juice he tried to dissuade her and he always made her use the loo at home or friend's homes whenever he possibly could, just in case they would be out somewhere later. Claire's mom had been a latch-kid key of the 60s, with two working parents who left her at home alone from the age of six, and she wasn't about to let that happen with her daughter.

He had also been told not to leave her with anyone, even if he thought he knew them, if they weren't family it wasn't allowed. So when they arrived at the hospital and he had to go straight into the delivery ward so did Claire.

Michele was working at reception but she had only worked there a year and he was pretty sure she didn't count as family.

Claire went into the surgery and saw what she saw and after that she vowed she would never see it again.

Faith's story was different. Faith had been in a serious relationship before Claire with Mark. She had refused to have sex with him unless he married her. And then one day she had. And she had fallen pregnant. At first she had a more than mild panic attack – she wasn't married, she wasn't ready, what would her mother say – the usual. But after speaking to Mark they had decided to keep it, they had even decided they had wanted it. At first she wasn't so sure but as she got more and more pregnant she got more and more attached. She spoke to her baby, would feel it kick, she named her, Thuli, and she loved her.

She carried her right through the nine months and then she was still born. She had to carry on pushing and give birth to a dead baby. Her whole body was ready for

the child. Her breasts ached and produced milk for a baby that couldn't drink it. She had stitches after pushing out a child who couldn't breathe. The stitches healed slowly, a physical reminder.

Mark and her had a baby together. A baby that had died and here he was having another baby with someone else.

But she didn't have time to respond because the next thing she knew Julia was crying and *she* was comforting *her*, the lamb sitting cold with congealing potatoes around it in a semicircle. Damn she hated Mark. Here she was, at one moment feeling sorry for herself and the next feeling sorry for someone she should hate. How had he orchestrated his life so that she was now feeling sympathy for the woman who had taken her place? She had always been the type of person who whenever somebody walked into her she was the one who would apologise for it. But this was too far.

## Julia

It was happening again. She couldn't help but look at everybody as someone she could possibly have sex with, or flirt with, or as a missed opportunity if she didn't. Even though she probably wouldn't she liked to think that she could. She wasn't usually attracted to women, well that was a lie, but she had acted on these attractions in a long while, yet here she was attracted to Faith. How unprofessional. Especially given the subject matter of their conversation. Perhaps it was because she knew that Faith liked women. Or maybe it was because she was opening up to her. Some random man had been nice to her at *Pick 'n Pay* and she had fallen for him in aisle ten, the ugliest of all aisles, with the bug spray and garden hoses. Now Faith was being nice and she had burst into tears.

On the other hand, she had sat around a table with a man who had said something completely sexist and rude, at one of Mark's work functions. All the women, and most of the men, had shunned him for it. But Julia had just wanted to take him to the bathroom and have her way with him, tell him it was all okay while she stroked his penis, and that she would be with him anyway, let her take his mind off it. And she was pretty sure he had meant what he said. It wasn't some accident or slip of the tongue. He wasn't a nice guy.

Opening up or not, being nice to her or not. It didn't really seem to matter. And her dreams didn't help. They only added to her waking feelings of entrapment. When she had been married to Ben she would often dream that he would cheat on her so that she could leave him without the guilt.

Julia generally woke up late. She didn't feel especially tired but she always tried to prolong her sleep. She just couldn't face the day most of the time. Which meant her sleep was often restless. It wasn't as bad as it had been after Tim, or after the abortion, when every time she woke up she realised she was back in a reality she didn't much care for. Falling asleep in those days was hard too. It often still was. If she was anxious



about the smallest thing she could be taken to any other unwelcome memory. For example, she could be thinking, with only light anxiety, about how she should do more around the house, only to be thrown, at high speed, into a memory of her father cooking a special family roast one Sunday. It had just been a regular Sunday, no special occasion per say, but they had all known that her father had wanted to make it special. The house had been tense a lot back then. The Sunday lunch started at two and by ten past they all knew that Josephine was drunk despite the bottle on the table only being a third empty. She was laughing loudly and talking even louder. Another thirty minutes past and the bottle was empty and Josephine was quieter and slower. They were all done, none of them wanting to have second helpings and prolong this dinner, except for Josephine who had barely eaten a thing. They sat in silence as they watched her chase peas around her plate, the only noise the clinking of the fork against her teeth when she missed her mouth.

When she did wake up it was sometimes eleven, or even twelve noon, and she was full of strange and unsettling thoughts from the disrupted dreams she had. This morning it had been one where she was kissing an old high-school crush, she felt elated and excited, but once she woke up and realized that she couldn't do that sort of thing, that it wasn't real, that she was married, she felt a sudden disappointment. Sometimes the dreams were with people she didn't know, sometimes it was more than just kissing, other times she felt guilty and sad and not at all relieved and excited. And of course those weren't her only dreams, sometimes she dreamt she was still married to Ben and woke in a cold sweat, other times she dreamt she was writing her high school exams again and she hadn't studied and she dreamt about the baby too, or thing, or fetus, or whatever it had been.

But right now, however unreal it felt to be opening up to an almost stranger, she was, in fact, awake. And in tears. She had been so sad about her lost baby and now she was feeling sexually attracted to the woman consoling her. With barely a minute to spare between the two.

"You know, I used to date women. An old friend of mine actually asked me if I was dating women because I knew they couldn't get me pregnant, after the abortion, and it was safer that way. Can you believe it? But that wasn't why." Julia looked at

Faith and tried to make eye contact but she was staring off into the distance, towards the lamb.

“I didn’t have an abort- I, I lost the - oh never mind,” Faith could tell it was no use. Julia couldn’t hear what she was saying over her cries. Julia was on her second glass of whiskey and downing it fast on the empty stomach they both knew she had.

Julia couldn’t even remember who had said that awful statement to her. It could have been Triks who she had barely seen since the wedding with Mark and hardly at all since her and Chris had broken up. Or maybe it had been her mother. It sounded like the type of thing her mother would say. But she hadn’t told her mother about the abortion. Her mother had once said to her, on her birthday, “Another year older, you should really be thinking about having children soon.” And Julia had replied, “Sorry” and then thought to herself how very Catholic it was of her to be apologising to her mother for not having thought about having children.

But of course she had thought about it. That was all she had thought about those few weeks after finding out she was pregnant.

She didn’t understand why she was feeling this way. Perhaps it was her mother being home. She had gone years without telling anyone and now, in the last month or so, she had told both Vishana and Faith, who she barely new. She couldn’t even blame it on Sam because she had told Vishana before she had even met him. She was feeling teary and sorry for herself.

She seemed to crying all the time.

Or otherwise horny.

It was no way to live.

## Vishana

Vishana's eyes were blurry. She always got allergies at this time of year. As she ran around the corner and wiped them, her home and Julia's came into view and she thought about her. They had been close, close enough that Julia had told her about the abortion she had had when she was in her early twenties. She said it helped that Vishana wasn't the motherly type, Vishana tried not to take offence and listened carefully to the story staring at the empty glasses on the table and realizing the water that had been in them wasn't enough, she excused herself momentarily to get tissues and some of Sam's whiskey.

When she came back, "I've been thinking about it a lot lately and I just wanted to tell someone, I hope you don't mind." Vishana didn't, she was glad to be the one there for Julia.

Julia told her that it was a one night stand, that she was drunk but that she knew they had used a condom, it just hadn't worked. She saw the guy around after that, they were in adjoining friendship circles, but she could never say more than a few words to him, she couldn't face him, he hit on her a few more times but eventually gave up. He obviously never found out, thinking the condom had worked why would he ask, why would anyone.

"Would you like to go for a run?" was Vishana's attempt at making her feel better.

"I hate running."

In a moment of unusual sass Vishana replied, "How would you know, you've never tried it." She was trying to lighten the mood but Julia just cried harder.

After that she forced Julia into running with her, whenever she could, no charge, she told her how it was a great, healthy, way to lose weight and de-stress. To be honest, most of the time was spent getting dressed, complaining about the cold, getting undressed and watching Julia have celebratory drinks afterwards, "a white wine for all

our hard work”. But it was fun and Vishana didn’t feel too guilty about it seeing as Julia wasn’t a paying client. Of course the fact that Julia wasn’t paying her didn’t instill too much of a sense of commitment in Julia and she would often cancel at the last minute. Vishana wondered if Mark did pay her for her workouts if Julia would be more likely to stick to them, she always was very conscious about the things Mark bought her.

Poor Mark, Vishana now thought, as she took out the key in her pocket and fiddled around trying to open the door. She spotted Gary and panicked. She did not want to talk to him - she had better hurry up. She sneezed and dropped the key. *Shit*. If she was right about Julia and Sam then Mark was in a similar boat to her. Mark might put up with it though, he put up with a lot from Julia. Maybe she should speak to him – maybe he already knew what was going on? She unlocked the door, she made it in just in time to pretend she hadn’t seen Gary waving. Sam was out buying groceries, he had a strict list from her and she had made him walk to the shops, he needed the exercise, so he would be a while. She went and got a glass of water, she needed to reach her eight cups a day.

Then she walked upstairs to take a shower and as she did so she looked out of the bedroom window and saw Sam, he was coming, not from the shops, but from Julia’s house and there Julia was standing in the doorway, Mark’s car not in the driveway.

As Sam got closer he noticed her watching him, she flinched but then decided not to move, she would stare him down, let him know that she knew even if she had to hold back a sneeze whilst doing so.

When he eventually got to the house, he really was out of shape thought Vishana, she still had on her death stare, “What?” was his only response and he said it with such faux innocence.

“You know what.” She felt vulnerable standing naked but for a towel. But she wouldn’t let it show and instead got dressed in front of him, almost aggressively, with great purpose she pulled on a pair of jeans and whipped a t-shirt out of her draw.

“Oh Vishana, you need to let this go, you’re being ridiculous.”

“I know you were out having an affair.” She decided to say it straight out. No more alluding to anything - it made it too easy for him to deny it.

“Where at *Pick ‘n Pay*?” He laughed and she wasn’t sure if he was faking it or if he was nervous. Which made her uneasy - when did she stop being able to read her husband?

“No, at *her* house, I saw you over there and you know it.”

“I forgot to buy sugar and I didn’t want you to be cross so I went over to Mark and Julia’s to see if I could borrow some, come on Vish, you know I’m a terrible liar, why would I have an affair?”

She scoffed at him calling it “Mark and Julia’s” like he ever went over when Mark was there. “Liars have affairs too, they’re just caught out a lot faster, *and* I didn’t put sugar on the list.” She would never put sugar on the list despite the fact that he kept putting it in his coffee.

She had heard a programme on talk radio, she occasionally went against her own rules and listened to podcasts on her runs even though she knew they messed with her rhythm, the show had been about why people always ask their partner who they had cheated on them with, why they so desperately wanted to know the details. The guest psychologist said that it’s because we like to think, or we do think, that we know our partners completely and that when they cheat on us, and when we find out, there is a realization that we don’t actually know this person as well as we thought we did and that we can never know them completely. That’s why we need to *know* who they cheated on us with. But Vishana knew that she knew Sam, she knew he was cheating on her and she knew who with. She had always known that Sam would cheat, even before he did, she knew his type, knew that he would never truly settle down, not for Vishana, but she had liked him so much she almost didn’t care about his past. And if Julia thought he settle would down for her, well then she was the one who didn’t really know him.

## Julia

She knew Vishana was married to a man named Sam but, despite their closeness, it was a while before she first met him. Weeks before Josephine arrived Vishana organised a drinks thing for the sole purpose of introducing the two of them. She had said something about how she couldn't meet Julia's mother who lived halfway across the world before she met Vishana's husband who lived just across the street.

Only they had already met. Some years ago..

When she saw him she recognized him instantly but she could see he didn't quite realize who she was. He knew that he knew her but she could tell he didn't know how they knew each other. The afternoon was awkward with Vishana being super chatty and Sam and Julia just eyeing each other coolly – Julia because of all the bad memories she had of Sam, and because she was cross that he didn't recognize her, and Sam because he could tell that Julia didn't like him.

To be fair to him, it wasn't really his fault, but she was still cross that he didn't even remember it. Or her. At one stage Vishana got up to get more wine and Julia insisted that she should leave. She could see that Vishana was disappointed – she had really wanted Sam and Julia to like each other, to get on, she had even had a glass of wine herself, but it clearly wasn't working, "Okay, if you must, I understand."

"I'm just going to use the bathroom," in the awkwardness Julia had drunk too much and now she was feeling both tipsy and desperate for the toilet. When she stumbled out of the bathroom Sam was there waiting for her, if she hadn't drunk so much she probably would have been quicker and angrier, "I fetched your coat for you" he handed it to her.

"Well I would say thanks but this is a bit creepy."

His eyes narrowed, "Listen, have we met before?"

"If you can't remember it's not my duty to fill in the gaps for you," she grabbed her coat and then added with a second thought, "don't tell Vishana." And she left.

Later, still in a foul mood she texted Vishana to apologise for her speedy exist, claiming she was feeling ill. Which was true, seeing Sam again had made her sick to her stomach.

She hoped Sam wouldn't tell Vishana the details. And then she remembered that he didn't know what had happened. After all, they had only been a one night stand, or, to be more exact, a two night stand.

They had both gone to the same bar most Friday's after work. Friends of hers knew friends of his and they had been making eyes at each other for a few weeks.

When she found out, two months later, that she was pregnant she was shocked. Sure her nipples had been chafing and her tummy hadn't been behaving all that well, but who doesn't have a tummy upset every now and again, and they had used protection. Condoms were meant to be ninety nine percent safe, right?

She had an abortion. She hadn't told anyone, none of her friends, and certainly not her mother who wasn't in the country anyway. She was ashamed. She had scheduled the operation in June, and told her close friends she was going to The States to visit her family for their summer. She did go to The States only she went a week later than she said. The rest of the time she spent crying in her apartment too scared to even go to the shops to get proper food incase someone asked her why she was still in Cape Town. That was the second and last time she went to visit her family. Her mother told her to stop moping around all the time, that she hadn't paid "all that money for your flight so that you could be a downer". Out of desperation to get it off her chest she eventually told Tim and one day Mark. She had read a stat once that one in five women have an abortion but she didn't know anyone else who had, not personally anyhow, she had tried to read someone's book about it but it made her too depressed, even reading that statistic made her depressed, she just couldn't be the strong feminist she wanted to when the topic came up. She knew it was her right and she knew it had probably been for the best but, still, she had put down a good few books and changed enough television channels whenever the topic came up. Maybe she did know women who had had abortions, maybe they didn't talk about it just like she didn't.

And then there was Sam, living in the same road as her and her not even realising he was there, and him not even knowing that she had aborted his child and all

of her many female friends with none of them aware of what had happened to the other because they were all too ashamed.

She didn't want to linger on it. To be accused of moping or, worse, be asked why she was moping and have to lie to her mother, so she decided to do her 'cleaning' to take her mind off things. She put away her phone. She didn't want to see Vishana's reply right now.

Julia did the thing where she would try and quickly clean up before the domestic worker came over. It was definitely a shame thing rather than out of any sort of sense of household duty. When she went into what was now known as "her mother's room" but which had, once, just been "the guest room" she noticed a lot of small pieces of paper on the floor. Julia's form of cleaning was more just sweeping things under a rug but these pieces were tiny and stuck to the floor which was probably why her mother, generally a rather anal woman, had left them. This was not the first time Julia has seen them there, there were even some stuck to the duvet cover when she came in and sat on the bed a few days ago. And her mother had been spending a lot of time locked up in this room. She wondered when she would tell her how long she was planning on staying and when she would realize that she could no longer, politely, be considered a guest.

Julia bent on her knees and scrapped one of the pieces. It didn't come off but a piece of her manicure did. Julia always tried to keep nice nails for when she gave her piano lessons. She rubbed it between her fingers: glue.

"MOM!"

"Please don't shout dear."

"What?"

"I hate it when you shout for me, just get up and walk, I'm only in the other room."

Julia walked, or rather stamped, over to the kitchen. Her mother was making one of her sandwiches and leaving crumbs everywhere. She was losing her cleanly habits with old age but she would never admit it. And she could never just make marmite and toast, it had to be lettuce, tomato, olives, pesto, feta, all sorts and if she



felt like feta and there wasn't any she would complain that the house was under stocked. Not that she even bought, or paid for, any of the groceries.

"What are those tiny pieces of paper everywhere?!"

"They're hardly everywhere, besides you don't clean yourself. I wish I could afford someone to clean my house back home." She was relieved to hear her mother refer to somewhere other than here as home.

"Talking of which, when are you going 'back home'?" She thought her moment was now but when she saw her mother's face she realized her harshness and no matter how harsh her mother was to her if she ever so much as got the tiniest bit antsy her mom would get *very* defensive. "What are you making, anyway?" she added trying to cover up her previous comment.

Her mother took a while to respond and then, "Fine, I didn't want to tell you because I was embarrassed about the paper crafts, but if you're going to keep nagging. It's okay to craft when you're young but as soon as you reach fifty it's seen very kitsch to craft, a cliché. And making envelopes of all things, society would have me crocheting but I suppose that's why I chose the envelopes instead." She was clearly cross about the first question and releasing this in her answer to the second.

"WHAT, are you talking about?"

"Penpals, penpals, I was doing some paper crafting for them. You know your grandparents met through being penpals in the war?"

"Which war? What? Never mind that." Julia was confused but somewhat glad she had avoided a fight about her mother's return date. So it wasn't just Paul she had been writing too? That gave her hope that Paul wasn't all that special to her mother, that he wasn't unique, if she had been locked up in this room the last few weeks sending letters all over the world. "How many penpals do you have?"

Her mother began to count them in her head but Julia thought of a better question, "How can you write letters to complete strangers and not to your own son?" Julia had recently received a letter from him today. And she had yet to see one addressed to her mother from the prison, although she hadn't noticed any of these penpal letters either so maybe Josephine was getting to the mailbox before her. "Have you written to him since you've been here? Or even once in the last few months?"

When Julia got home she would always check the mailbox. Sometimes she only left the house in order to check it. Monday was a happy mail day, she had post from Tim. She always tried to make her letters to him look nice, with ribbons and tape and things, he had named it happy mail, he tried to do the same but didn't have much to work with, so mainly they were little doodles he drew in the margins. He had drawn an old fashioned telephone with a looping cord up the side of today's letter.

The letter started off well but by the end Julia was irritated. Tim had added a "Ps." Trying to play it down and make it seem more innocuous than it was. "Ps." Is said, "have you heard from mom? She hasn't been taking any of my calls".

Of course Josephine hadn't, she couldn't take calls from South Africa, surely he knew that? And then, she thought, what if he didn't know their mother had been here all these weeks? Had she even told him? She hadn't bought it up yet, but she might as well now.

"Er, I started to, but you know I just don't have that much to say." How she could have something to say to someone she had never met yet nothing to say to her son was beyond Julia, as much of her mother's behavior was. She opened her mouth, closed it, and just as she was about to open it again Mark came storming in going straight for the cabinet. She knew what that meant: whiskey and whiskey meant a bad day at the office. Well, she didn't care, she had had a bad day too and she was willing to let it out.

"Why can't you just write to him?!"

"Is this because of the paper stuck to the floor?" was the response she got, her mother was dodging, again. She had taken up olive pickling in full force after she got sober. Their dad had said he didn't understand why, he kept talking about how a packet of olives was only twelve rand, why would anyone make their own? But she needed something to do with her hands. Maybe this was similar? But it seemed she was using it more as a way to avoid Tim than to avoid drinking.

Julia sighed. But her mother went one, "You're jealous that they're taking time away from you. That I spend more time crafting than I do with you." She was in no way, shape, or form jealous of her mother's ability to make pink envelopes. Was the woman going nuts?

“Wow.” Julia thought. When she was a child her mother always accused her of being jealous of her brother and the attention he got. He had got glasses when he was five and Julia was ten. And like any child Julia had thought it would be fun if she had got some too, well she wasn’t allowed because she didn’t need them. But when she was a whole lot older and she had gone to the doctor all by herself and he had prescribed her antidepressants her mother had accused her of being jealous of all the attention her brother got because *he* was on antidepressants. Julia was shocked. She wasn’t sure if her mother was cross because she had gone to the doctor alone without telling her, even though when she had asked her mother she wouldn’t take her, or if she just couldn’t deal with the thought of both of her children being on medication for their mental health.

She had also had her mother accuse her of being jealous of her pet dog, Chappie, just because she didn’t like the yappy little thing did not mean she was jealous of it. They had taken the dog with them when they moved, paid all that money to put him on the plane, but she didn’t care, her mother could spend all the time she liked with the dog for all she cared. It’s not like anyone else would.

Being accused of jealousy towards an inanimate object though that was a new one. For both of them.

She knew if she stayed in the kitchen with her mother any longer she would say something she would regret. And Mark was here now and he could deal with her mother, his whiskey drinking would give her something else to focus on and he seemed to already be in a bad mood so what difference would it make. “I’m cleaning up for tomorrow,” was all she said and then she was gone.

## Josephine

Josephine clocked Mark's whiskey but she didn't think it was worth commenting on, it was only his second drink this week and it was already Thursday, plus she needed him on her side. She didn't understand why Julia never took any of this out on her father. He still lived in The States and he neither accepted Tim's reverse calls nor went to visit him. He never received anyone's calls, reverse or not, that had been one of the things that irritated Josephine most about him. He was never reachable but she didn't understand why, he only worked half day as a handyman and the other half he spent on his "projects". She was a nurse and sometimes worked eighteen hour shifts but she had always had time to phone him back and make his dinner and whatever else. Julia was a bit like her father in that way.

Josephine had not taken one of his calls since she had been here as revenge. And, also, because she didn't feel like listening to him begging her to go back.

"How was work today?" Josephine went to fetch the ice.

"Not great." Descriptive, she tried again, "the Chaplin account again?"

"No, um, something else." Josephine past a few blocks to him and, suddenly, she saw why Julia was maybe the catch in this partnership. She sighed. Might as well go and clean up the paper on her bedroom floor, it would be easier than this.

Then he opened his mouth. "It's this guy, at work." He took a big gulp of whiskey then looked down at the glass and over at her, "I think he's been coming in drunk."

"Yes?" There was more to the story than that. Not too long ago Mark had thought he had caught Roger stealing from the petty cash box. He wasn't quite sure what he was seeing but that was what it had looked like. And it had made sense, he had heard Roger on the phone, a few cubicles over, talking to someone about money problems.

Roger was one of the few people who had a key to the petty cash box, being in the finance section of the insurance office. He mainly dealt with the small spending budgets of the office. Nothing huge.

But, at the end of the week when the administrator checked the petty cash, everything was accounted for so he had left it. He had spoken to Roger about it and he had been pretty shifty but he denied it all. Mark didn't take it up with the big bosses seeing as the money was all back but he did warn Roger and he was his superior. He had looked scared and had avoided Mark ever since.

Now, however, he was pretty sure Roger had been in the office drunk. And he was worried he had caused him to drink. It was just Roger, himself and about three others in the office at the moment, most of the staff didn't work this close to Christmas but there were some skeleton staff in to keep things running, Mark because he couldn't let go of work and Roger because he had taken most of his leave already.

Mark had flat out asked Roger if he was drunk. He hadn't thought before he asked, he was just so shocked. Roger had promised him that he wasn't, that he was just under the weather. But although people under the weather did behave strangely their breath didn't usually smell of liquor.

"What should I do?"

"Report him." Mark was a bit taken aback by Josephine's blunt response. He had thought, given her history, that she would have wanted him to go easy on Roger. "Someone should have reported me. Then maybe I would have stopped," She paused, "probably not. But maybe."

The thing that eventually got Josephine to quit after all that time and all that begging wasn't Trevor threatening to leave her or him threatening to tell her own mother or the kids or any of that. It was Allan, or Reginald, as she later found out was his real name. When she first started drinking, properly drinking, she would go to the local corner bottle shop once a week to pick up the wine and some beers for Trevor. When it started to become more of a habit and she started to feel embarrassed she would mix it up. She would go to the *Pick 'n Pay* and head to the wine section whilst doing her weekly

grocery shop, the *Spar* shop on a Thursday and the local on a Saturday. She told herself she needn't be embarrassed it wasn't a bad habit, just a few drinks in the week, and what was the matter with that – she had a hard job, she needed to unwind.

Sometimes she would send Trevor to do the Saturday run but he never bought enough to last both Saturday and Sunday – he just didn't think about the fact that bottle stores in Cape Town were closed on a Sunday.

That was in the beginning. After a while she got too desperate to drive all the way to the other bottle stores. It was easier, and safer, to just walk. She realized she was there quite often, she knew most of the cashiers names, but she never thought of herself as being there *too* often, after all she was just a friendly person who took note of things like names.

She wasn't like Alchie Alan who was there every single morning and most evenings too.

Trevor and her shared a bank account so there wasn't too much chance of her running out of money too quickly. What she did have to be careful about were those damn text messages. If she spent over R500 Trevor got a text message alerting him. He said it was for safety reasons in case the card got stolen. But she wasn't sure why she didn't get a text when he did the same. Especially seeing as she was more or less the breadwinner. What was most annoying about the texts was the fact that they said where she had spent. It was all well and good if she added on three or four bottles of wine to the weekly grocery shop because then he would only see it was from *Pick 'n Pay* and she could blame the high price on needing extra bits and pieces to replenish the cleaning cupboard or toiletries or something else pricy. This was one of the excuses she gave herself for going back and forth to the bottle store so much. If she was just able to buy the week's lot in one go without causing suspicion then she wouldn't have to keep coming back making sure she didn't go too far over R400.

One morning after Trevor had left for work and Josephine had woken up with her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, she had gone to the kitchen and swallowed a litre of water and many panados. When they wouldn't work she had turned to the cupboard. Sometimes she just knew the only way to get rid of a hangover was to have a

stiff drink. She had called in to work to say she would be late but she had to go in, she had already taken too many sick days this month.

She was, at the time, working in the records department of a clinic, she found it paid better and the hours were more convenient than the nursing job she had previously. Plus she was usually alone in the office with no one to spy on her.

“The cupboards were bare said old mother Hubbard” Josephine sang to herself sarcastically. So she went to her secret stash but there was hardly a drop left. She didn’t remember when she had finished it off. She looked at her watch, it was just before nine, she could get to the bottle store and still make it to work by ten.

She debated whether to get two bottles of vodka or four bottles of white wine. She liked the vodka more but then she would have to buy a mixer and that might take her up past the text message limit. “Screw it” she thought, she would buy the vodka and drink it straight. Mixers had so much sugar in it and everyone knew it was the sugar in these drinks that gave you the real hangover.

She took her purchases to the counter and who was there but Alchie Alan, “how sad” thought Josephine “at this time of the morning” before noticing a funny yellow stain on her white shirt.

A few weeks later and Josephine was all dolled up. Her and Trevor were going to a friend’s fortieth. She was quite proud of her “look”. She was wearing a nice skirt, a pretty silk blouse and she had done her hair and make-up. She was even wearing kitten heels and she never wore heels. She was feeling extra confident because she was only thirty-eight and Anne and all the others were already having their fortieths.

Trevor and her were going together. He was going to come home from work and quickly shower and change into a suit. He was due home soon but she thought she would just nip off to buy a bottle before they went. She told herself it was because she knew the price of cash bars at these things and how quickly the free wine flew off the tables but, really, she had done it before. It always shocked Anne when she saw Josephine stumbling around – she didn’t understand how it happened – she had only seen her having a few, certainly no more than she, herself, had drunk.

Later that night when she fell over and Trevor gave her a look she would blame the kitten heels “I never wear heels,” she would slur. But right now she was at the local choosing which bottle of red to get. If she was honest with herself it didn’t really matter, they all did the trick. She got an expensive one as a treat, she felt less like an alcoholic drinking expensive wine, but by the time she reached the till she had changed her mind. She could get two cheaper ones for the price of this one and keep the second for tomorrow. Yes, she would do that.

Back in the aisle she noticed Alchie Alan creep up on her. She tried to back away. She couldn’t stand him, he smelt like liquor and looked just as bad. He greeted her by name, she couldn’t remember ever giving him her name, “Hello Josephine.”

“Um, hi.” She tried to surreptitiously take a step back but she clunked into some bottles on the rack behind her.

“How are you?” He asked.

“Fabulous, and yourself?” Clearly not fabulous, she thought.

This went on for a while, much longer than Josephine would have liked, some small talk back and forth until Alchie Alan took a step forward, leaned in and said “Would you like to go to the Chester, for a meal?”

Josephine balked, “Are you asking me out? To a bar?” This came out before she had time to filter herself but she didn’t care all that much. If he was going to be so direct so could she.

“Well, yes,” And then with more confidence, “*yes*, I am.”

“Er, no thanks.”

“I haven’t finished asking yet.”

“Well the answer is the same.”

“No need to be rude.”

She was getting annoyed now, she could do with a swig of that wine, “Why would you even ask?”

“What do you mean? I like you, thought we could go on a date.”

“Yes, *okay*,” she could see why he liked her, “but why would you ever think I would say yes? I mean why would a person like *me* go out with a person like *you*?” She was cross he was being so pushy and invading her personal space, he had even tried to



stoke her arm, at least that was what it had looked like he was trying to do, his arms flailing about, but maybe he was just trying to balance himself, “you’re here every single morning and most afternoons, you smell funny, you look funny and you’re an alcoholic. Are you even employed?” she had liquid courage.

“How would you know?”

“How would I know what?”

“How would you know that I am here every afternoon and every morning? How would you know unless you were here too. What, unless you have spies in the place. It’s like in school when you got in trouble for not closing your eyes during prayers – but how did the teachers know unless their eyes were open too?”

“What?”

“And you don’t look too hot yourself. *And* I bet you’re unemployed too, or just short of being so. We’re two peas in a pod, you and I.” And with that he grabbed a bottle of the cheapest white, without even looking for it, and headed to the till.

When Josephine got to the car she pulled down the mirror above her head. He was right, she didn’t look that great, her mascara was smudged and her lipstick was too orange for her skin tone. She got out a tissue and wiped it off, she tried to apply a light pink colour but she couldn’t do it, her hands were too shaky and she was so unused to dressing up. He may have been right about her appearance tonight but only because of some wonky make-up, she thought, she refused to believe he was right about the other things he had said. Although her and Trevor had spoken about moving to The States if things with her current job kept going the way they were going, but that was only a very vague notion, and things were definitely going to get better. Soon, Josephine thought. She knew it.

Things didn’t change right away, they never did, in fact that night Josephine drank so much she passed out on a couch and Trevor had to take her home early.

## Mark

Mark thought that having Josephine around wasn't all that bad. To Julia the thought of having her mother around all the time brought up old memories of when they would all stay home from work together - her mother hungover and her brother and her with no way of getting to school.

Her dad left early and assumed Josephine would drop them off but sometimes she didn't and they would flop around the house, bored, and too scared to make much noise in case they woke Josephine. Then Trevor would get home and they be sworn to secrecy and have to make up stories about their school days, once or twice they even put their uniforms on and pretended they had "only just got home". But Mark didn't know about those days. And besides the fact that Josephine did some of the cooking she also got Julia out of bed. Not in the sense that she came and knocked on her bedroom door every morning telling her to get up but, more, in the way that Mark knew that Julia was too embarrassed to sleep in when her mom was around. She liked the pretence of getting up and looking busy. Julia was doing all the grocery shopping now – mainly to get out of the house and avoid her mother but still, at least she was getting out of the house and, better yet, at least there was food in the house and not all of it was junk, again, this was mainly to impress Josephine.

He did have to keep them apart at times. Sometimes Julia's shopping trips extended beyond groceries and she would come home with items of clothing. She often bought Mark things, even though it was with his own money, he still saw these items as gifts from Julia. He ignored the fact that maybe they were guilty gifts or maybe they were just a way to change his dress style. Or "lack thereof" as he had once overheard Julia telling a friend, probably Vishana.

Once or twice she had come swirling around in a new skirt and wearing those Christian Louboutins she loved so much and he had to discreetly lead her away to another part of the house. Her mother had been a nurse, she wasn't a material woman

and she frowned on those that were, perhaps this was why Julia lapped up lavish goods, because she had been denied them as a child? He wasn't sure but she had once told him a story about when she was thirteen. She had made friends with a set of very rich twins, they weren't rich in an obnoxious way, but they had money, both their parents were doctors. Because they were thirteen and there wasn't much to do as a thirteen year old – too old to play with dolls but too young to get into clubs or drive – they would go 'shopping' at the mall. Or, rather, the twins would buy a whole bunch of clothes while she watched and gave advice. Usually she would buy a cheeseburger from McDonalds as her contribution to consumerism. But, once, after saving up a while (she did get pocket money albeit not that much and only when her mother remembered or was reminded or, sometimes when she did some babysitting) she splurged and bought a skirt for R200, she had wanted to experience the fun and excitement that the twins seemed to get after buying something, plus she really liked the skirt. When she got home she was bouncing around planning when to wear it, when it would have the most effect, when her mother noticed her bag and said "what did you buy?" She showed her and Josephine just lifted her eyebrows and then the price tag and replied "R200? I wish I could afford to buy myself nice things for R200." And the guilt set in. She never did end up wearing the skirt.

Well so Julia told it anyway.

He didn't want to spoil her fun, Julia was hardly ever visibly happy but he knew that him shoving her into the next room would be a lot better than if Josephine said something to upset her.

Although she no longer wore the Louboutins, she was about wearing some Jimmy Choos the last time he had seen her dressed up. She was a woman of extremes when it came to clothing, she was either in her pajamas or heels and diamonds. He hadn't seen much of the Louboutins since he had come home to a vile smelling packet in the corner of passageway.

"What is in there?"

"My Christian Louboutins."

"Um, why do they smell like that?"

"They're covered in vomit."

Julia had proceeded to tell him that she had been to the park in them today. She was swaying as she relayed this. “With Vishana?” But if she had gone with Vishana she would have been in sneakers.

“No, alone.”

“Why?”

She said that she had just needed to get out of the house but Mark was pretty sure she was curious about the boy who had hung himself. There had had a memorial for him that day in that very park. And sure enough that’s where her story ended up. She said she was sitting on a bench near the tree, she had taken some wine after gatecrashing the memorial, and she was thinking about her cousin. She hadn’t really known him that well, he was twelve when she was only about five or six. But he had hung himself. Afterwards the Catholic church had insisted that he should be buried upside for committing a mortal sin. A twelve year old.

And while she was sitting on that bench sipping her wine out of a plastic cup and feeling sorry for both herself and the cousin she never knew two adolescent girls walked past. The one saying, “I know this is bad, to, like, speak ill of the dead and all, but I didn’t really like him, he was a bit of a creep.”

Julia wondered if it had been a relief to go. To be away from girls like these. He probably hadn’t been a creep, just an outsider. Would these girls have ever gone to his parties? Or were they only in attendance because something horrible had happened to him? This is what he would be remembered for. His big scene in the park. Not his work, or his loved ones, or any of that. She felt sad for him and for herself. What had she done with her life? What would she be remembered for?

“The whole thing was too much for me, Mark, and then I got thinking, what would Tim be remembered for? Would mom just be the mother of that guy in prison? What would any of us be remembered for? And I felt sick, psychically sick, and then I keeled over on the bench and vomited all over my shoes. And now I can’t look at them.”

“How much of that wine did you actually drink?” She looked as if she had been crying.

She moved from the doorway of the lounge into the passageway and picked up the plastic bag with her pinky finger holding it as far away from her as possible. She said she would put them on the balcony and clean them the next day. But a few days after that Mark saw them at the bottom of the kitchen bin. They were still wrapped up in a plastic packet, tied with a tight looking knot, almost hidden, but for the smell.

## Julia

She had held out hope when Tim had been arrested and then accused. She was so sure that he would be let off that she had bought him Christmas presents, she had wrapped them up in Christmas paper and tied them with ribbons even though the extra packaging would add to the weight and meant it would cost more to send. And then she had sent them in the usual parcel she sent out in October, with her parents' gifts. She had sent extra because, she thought, he deserved them after this trying time, but by the time they got there, in late January, another strike had been held by South African Post Office, he was still in jail, having not ever been released on bail. The family had applied for it, even though they didn't have the money to pay for it, most of them were looking at Mark though they hadn't explicitly asked him and he had rather too casually mentioned to Julia that the rand to dollar was not looking good. In the end they didn't need his money however, because Tim wasn't granted bail.

Josephine had invited Julia to church. She really, desperately, wanted to say no but it was Christmas and she knew whatever present she got her mother she would hate. So she decided maybe she could do this for her instead, to make up for it. Josephine celebrated and did the big roast thing on Christmas Eve, Julia and Mark usually did a big lunch on Christmas day but seeing as Josephine was staying with them they were doing it her way. Julia kicked up a bit of a fuss for a while in regards to this, mainly because she was sick of always pandering to what her mother wanted but when Mark pointed this out she gave in, "Do you actually have anything against having our dinner on Christmas Eve rather?"

"Well, not really, no."

"Okay, so are you maybe just doing this because you don't want to give in to your mother?" She was doing that exactly and consciously but Mark didn't need to know that.

"I guess, maybe, without really knowing it."

And that was that. Mark was cooking the mains, Josephine was doing dessert and Julia was doing drinks, she had gone so far as to look up virgin cocktails for her mother. Usually they would attempt to have friends round but this year it was “just family” which really meant just the three of them because none of Mark’s family had been invited.

A line had been drawn between the two families. Josephine had thought she was being subtle in blocking Mark’s side out. Even Julia had thought perhaps they hadn’t noticed the snide remarks to begin with. They never said anything or reacted which just made Josephine even ruder. Josephine reckoned they were either too polite or too stupid.

Once she heard Mark on the phone saying, “You’re giving her just what she wants by not coming to these family get-togethers when she’s here. Don’t let Josephine’s rudeness be the reason we don’t see you.” It turned out they *were* too polite but to Josephine that amounted to the same thing.

“Don’t be polite Mark, have another slice of cake. There’s more than enough for all of us.” Mark took another piece but Julia had a feeling he was being polite in taking the cake not in declining it. It was rather a rock of a cake that was concealed under a lot of overly sweet icing.

“What are these lovely drinks, Julia? They taste just like the real thing, I almost feel drunk.” Josephine was in quite a good mood.

“They’re virgin cosmopolitans with a twist. It’s probably the placebo effect – they’re in cocktail glasses and have most of the same ingredients so they look and taste the same. “

“Is the twist that they were made by someone who hasn’t been a virgin since she was fourteen?” She was laughing.

“No, it’s the piece of orange rind.” Julia wasn’t going to give in, her mother would take any excuse to change her mood back to one of sullenness if she let her.

After dinner they had coffee and then Julia got ready to go to midnight mass with Josephine. Mark had volunteered to stay at home and do the washing up. Conveniently.

Once again Julia guessed she was dressed incorrectly but her mother didn't say anything, she just looked at her and suggested she take something warm to cover her shoulders even though it was midsummer. When they got to the church, her mother, who Julia remembered always going straight to the front two pews, was, instead, looking around and taking her time. Perhaps she had remembered incorrectly, it had been about five years.

"Mom, it's filling up fast."

"Yes, okay, I guess you're right – here."

They ended up in the fourth row, Julia hadn't prepared for this and had left her glasses at home, she couldn't read the numbers that corresponded to the hymns. When it came time for the responsorial psalm her mother got up and walked to the altar – Julia was not surprised that her mother was leading the psalm only that she hadn't told her about it - or bragged about it Julia amended her thoughts as this was more likely, then realized she was in church and tried to amend them back. When they went up for communion Julia had a slight panic attack as to whether she should put her left hand over her right or her right hand over her left before receiving communion – she just couldn't remember. Again, it had been at least five years.

And then it was over and they were out in the parking lot. Julia was exhausted. It was close to half past one in the morning – mass was always a long one over the holidays. But her mother seemed to know and want to talk to everyone she met.

"Wow mom, you know a lot of people."

"Yes, I suppose, considering the time I've been here." Julia was pretty sure she was implying that she, Julia, had been here many years and not made one friend at the church. She had called the father by the wrong name - Father Patrick was Father Matthew now. They seemed to wait ages until everyone in the parking lot had left and Julia began to feel a bit scared, the two of them alone in the dark. Although, perhaps she was more tentative about being alone with her mother than alone in the dark.

"Um, should we go?"

"Yes, I guess so." Her mother sounded disappointed and still didn't move. Julia, in a moment of awkwardness and to fill the dark and lonely silence started telling her mother of the anxiety she had faced about which hand to put over which.



“Yes, I meant to speak to you about that.”

“Oh, no, did I do it wrong? I did, didn’t I? Do you think Father noticed?”

“No, it’s not that, I was just thinking, if you’re going to take communion again you really should go to confession first.”

“Oh. Okay.”

When they got home Mark was in bed half reading, half asleep. “You didn’t have to stay up.”

“I wanted to make sure you got home okay.”

“We got home, not sure if all is okay though.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“Oh, nothing, just the usual, I’m a sinner.”

Julia overslept. Which wasn’t unusual. What was, however, was that she had done so on Christmas day. She always woke early on Christmas – like a little kid. But not this Christmas. At around half past eleven she rolled out of bed and wondered downstairs. It was very sunny but she knew it was also summer so she was holding out hope that it was before nine. Without even asking Mark looked at her and went to fetch the coffee beans.

“What time is it?”

“Half past eleven. Ish.” It was actually closer to twelve but Mark was too scared to tell her this so he was rounding down.

“Oh, oh no!” Their friends were coming round at twelve thirty and there was a lot to do.

Her mother walked into the kitchen. Her apron on and her hands full of flour. She had packed an apron in to her suitcase and brought it all the way from The States. She hadn’t bought a proper pair of summer shoes with but she had bought an apron. When asked why she had responded “I didn’t think you would have one.”

“You’ve missed present opening – that’s unlike you. We will have to do it this evening once everyone has left. Why you insisted on doing this lunch with everyone,

when we celebrated last night, I don't know. And now you've overslept and Mark and I have had to do everything."

Julia wanted to point out that one: it was not everyone, it was just one other couple. They usually did a much bigger thing than this but given that her mother very clearly wanted the main event to be the night before they had decided not to. And two: the reason why she had woken up so late was probably because her mother had kept her in the church parking lot until after half past one in the morning. But she held her tongue. If she wanted the day to run smoothly she would need to choose her battles.

Sarah and John were due to arrive soon – the one couple Josephine sort of approved of in Julia and Mark's friendship circle and just as boring as their names alluded to. But not before Mark's parents arrived to both Julia and Josephine's surprise, or rather, horror. Julia had been unaware Mark had invited them this year, given the circumstances.

"I told him to," Josephine said to Julia, "I didn't think they would come though. And they're always early. Don't they know it's almost as rude to turn up early as it is to turn up late? I haven't even taken my apron off." Julia remembered a time when she had been ten minutes late getting out of school after hockey practice which usually ended at four-thirty. When she got to the gate she had seen no sign of her mother's Toyota Corolla so she had assumed that Josephine was the late one. Two hours later she figured she must have been left behind. But, it turned out her mother did not have the patience to wait ten minutes, "late is late", and had purposefully driven off when she was not there waiting at the school gates. Although the bottle store also closed at five, so she could have just been racing to get there. Her mother did not abide lateness and Julia could barely imagine something she found "almost as bad".

Julia slipped out of the room she had bought Mark's parents gifts but, thinking she was only seeing them on Boxing Day, had not wrapped them or written a card. When she returned she was in trouble for leaving her mother "alone with those people" and Sarah and John were just arriving.

Of course they couldn't just sit down and eat Christmas lunch, they first had to exchange presents and have drinks and open the presents and make a big to-do about it all even though Julia was fairly sure she would be getting a bar of vanilla soap from

Sarah and Mark would be getting some form of alcohol. She had stopped putting much effort into the gifts that they gave Sarah and John, usually it was something re-gifted and homogenous. In the past she would get slightly anxious about re-gifting – she was often scared that she would give someone back something they had given her – but with them it was easy as she always knew what she had been given. That was not to say that she didn't re-gift the vanilla soap, just not to them.

Drinks were passed around with Mark's parents refusing anything alcoholic and Josephine rolling her eyes. She had always judged them for not drinking before five pm calling them "goodie two shoes" despite the fact that she didn't drink at all. If this was ever pointed out, however, she would reply with "Yes but I used to and I never let the time of day stop me, if you're going to drink then drink."

Two thirds of the way through opening the presents, Julia was busy opening hers from Sarah and John, it was a vanilla hand cream, "Oh how unusual!" was all she could say, which earned her a funny look from most of the rest of the party, everyone being perfectly aware that there was not normally anything usual at all about vanilla hand cream, the doorbell rang. Julia, seeing an opportunity got up to open it. When she got there who was standing outside but Paul. At first she thought he had come by to drop off church leaflets or to check if her mother was staying sober during the festive season, or something like that, as she had only met him that one time at the Christian church group. But then she noticed that he was holding a bunch of chrysanthemums.

"Hello Julia."

"Um, hello, come up." *I suppose.*

They arrived inside just in time to witness Josephine opening a gift of vanilla soap.

"Mom..."

"Don't interrupt dear it's very rude.... Oh, Paul, hello." She said the first part rather sharply and the second rather coolly. Perhaps her mother hadn't invited Paul as Julia had first thought, perhaps he was *just* checking in. Either way it would have the same outcome as they would have to invite him to stay for lunch now.

He handed the yellow chrysanthemums over to Josephine who looked at them rather disdainfully.

“Can I offer, you a drink, um, Paul?” Mark was up and trying to find something to do, something to ease the tension, he couldn’t stand silences. Paul nodded towards the glass of whiskey in Mark’s hand, then caught Josephine’s eye and replied “just some water please.”

“Oh, how boring, have a real drink, we have enough teetotalers in this house.” Josephine was walking towards the kitchen to put the flowers in some water and leaving them alone, in the lounge, with Paul. Julia could see Sarah asking Mark’s mom who Paul was. Julia did some vague introductions, giving only first names and nothing more, after all she had nothing more she could say about Paul, no epithet other than “this is Paul, the man my mother knows from the Christian group across the way from AA who I think she may be having an affair with.” And she wasn’t about to say that.

As they were sitting down to lunch, and Mark handed Paul a glass, John asked Josephine if she would like something to drink, “I have something to drink, a glass of water is a drink too you know.” John didn’t know that Josephine was an alcoholic but Julia knew that her mother always took offense to anyone offering her an alcoholic drink, no matter what. She also thought that her mother would probably get offended if they didn’t offer her one either, she would say something like “he doesn’t know I’m an alcoholic, he could have offered me a drink, it’s rude not to.”

“Don’t worry John, I will make her one of the cocktails I was making last night.”

When they settled down Julia noticed that there was a place set for Paul although she didn’t remember seeing anyone get up to set one for him after he arrived. And her mother was still refusing to look him in the eye. She sat as far away as possible and even made small talk with Mark’s mother in order to avoid him. Halfway through the roast lamb that Mark had cooked the phone rang. Julia jumped up to answer it before her mother could find another excuse to leave the table.

It was her dad. With the time difference over there it was probably just morning.

“Hi dad,”

“Hi dear, merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, dad.”

They spoke for a while about this and that and he mentioned Tim had phoned him. They were having turkey for lunch at the prison.

“I’ve never understood this whole turkey thing, it’s very American, and it tastes so dry.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never had it, but I can imagine a nice roast lamb is better.”

“Anyway, I suppose Tim doesn’t mind it much, it’s probably better than what they usually get there. He sounded in good spirits.”

Her dad almost always said this. She wasn’t sure if he was just saying it to make her feel better or if Tim just pretended on the phone each time to make him feel better.

Josephine and Paul came in, carrying the plates. “Really, I can manage on my own.”

“No, I want to help.”

“Who is that? Is that your mother? Who is she speaking to?”

“Oh, no, it’s just Sarah, she’s speaking to John.” She lied. “I will tell mom you called, she’s just on the loo right now, anyway, I must go, we’re right in the middle of lunch, love you dad.”

“Love you too, Jules.”

She didn’t enjoy lying to her father but she didn’t feel like asking her mother to speak to him again, she always said no, she knew she shouldn’t make up excuses for the woman either but it was just easier this way. She couldn’t face another fight. Not today.

When she returned to the table her mother was bringing out the dessert and Paul was helping her serve it. They seemed to have made up - “don’t cut the slices that big – we’re not at a five year olds birthday party, Paul” – or sort of.

“That was dad,” no one had asked, “he said Tim was doing well, they’re going to have turkey for lunch at the- “

“Please, Julia, we don’t want to hear about that right now.” She handed her a plate.

She took it feeling upset and a bit angry – her mother never wanted to hear about Tim, ever. And wasn't Christmas about family. Here they were, her mother not wanting to talk to her father or about her brother and all of them clambering over themselves desperate to get thirty seconds with the woman. Mark caught her eye and gave her a sympathetic look but it wasn't good enough for Julia, she wanted him to say something for once, to stand up against Josephine. She couldn't even be nice to her husband's parents.

“Would anyone like tea or coffee with their dessert?” She wanted to get out of the room. She was scared she might cry.

“Could I have another one of those cocktails you make so well, dear?”

Josephine looked up from cutting the cake and made eye contact. Smiling.

“I wasn't fourteen.”

“Hmmm?”

“I wasn't fourteen when I lost my virginity – I was sixteen but what did it matter to you anyway, you weren't here.” Julia got up crying and ran from the room much to the surprise of the guests. She saw the horrified look on Mark's mother's face but she didn't care – Mark would make up some excuse about her rash behavior like he always did and her mother would act wounded and confused. The woman never took responsibility for anything, let alone apologised. Usually these things ended with a screaming match, somebody, anybody, apologising to Josephine her saying she wouldn't accept it, that “you can't just keep apologising and never changing”, no one speaking to anyone for a few days and then the whole thing blowing over without anyone ever mentioning it again. But today they had guests.

Julia stormed upstairs and flung herself on the bed in tears. Mark would be up soon trying to console her and she just didn't feel like being consoled. She wanted her tears and her anger. She got up with the intention of going to the bathroom and locking the door to give herself some more time. Maybe she would take a long bath and pretend she was busy so that no one could disturb her. This idea had the added bonus of meaning nobody else could bath or shower while she was locked up in there which would really irritate her mother who had to have her bath at six pm every night.

Instead, however, she ended up in her mother's room at her desk, opening her drawers, taking out envelopes and reading the letters inside them.

She pulled out a letter from a particularly glittery envelope. Just what did she write to all these strangers that she couldn't write to her own son? These people she had never met. These people that she could spend all her free time writing to.

“Hello?”

She jumped, she wasn't sure how long she had been here, and Mark was outside the bedroom door, knocking, she started hurriedly trying to put everything back where she found it. “Dammit, I don't care.” There was no way she could put it back just like she had found it, her mother would know. By the time Mark opened the door, he waited a while but when she didn't respond he came in, she was crying and covered in glitter.

“I thought I heard you in here – what's going on?”

“What's going on is that my mother is a real bitch!” Julia couldn't help but be snappy. She couldn't wipe away her tears fast enough as they streamed down her face. Poor Mark, it wasn't his fault, but here he was and it was all coming out aimed at him.

Mark let her rant and then asked, rather timidly, “Is it such a big deal? I know she's been here quite a few weeks, but Tim's letters take forever to get here, maybe she just didn't tell him to write to her here because she knew she would be back home before they got here.”

“Would she though? Would she really? Or is she just going to live here, in South Africa, in our house, with us, for the rest of her life? For the rest of our lives? Because you know she will probably outlive us.”

Mark didn't respond. Julia thought this may be because he probably realised that she was in the type of mood where whatever answer he gave she would have been upset with him. He could say, yes her mom had been here a really long time and agree with her but then she would shout at him for wanting her mother to leave, and the other option was to disagree with her which was never the right thing to do in times like these. Instead he comforted her while she cried and helped her try and put things back on the desk as they had been.

Half the problem was that Julia also felt a bit sorry for her mother. She was stuck between sadness and anger after reading through some of her letters. Some of them were just silly little anecdotes from strangers and she still thought that if her mother had time to read and reply to those that she could write to her son. But, some of them, the majority, the ones that were written over five or six pages were from other alcoholics talking about their recovery. And a few from people who had family members who were incarcerated. She had even found an old one from Paul. By the looks of things he too had a loved one locked up. And she couldn't get cross with her over those letters. So, instead she was sad, sad that her mother never spoke to anyone real in her life about it. Even Paul, now that she had met him in real life, she had started to push him away.

When her mother came upstairs after everyone had left she had wanted to confront her but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. She was exhausted and her mother always won. She would also know that she had been through her stuff and that would cause even more drama. Instead she went to bed early and ate her dinner, leftover lamb, under the duvet claiming sickness as her excuse. She knew, downstairs, while Mark and Josephine ate bits and pieces, still quite full from their lunch that she would say something like, "if she's well enough to eat she's well enough to eat downstairs with us."

One thing she wondered while she lay in bed was why hadn't their dad told Tim that Josephine was here? Surely he had been in contact with him before now? She wished she could phone Tim.

When she woke up Mark had already left for work. It was Boxing Day but he had claimed there were one or two things in the office he needed to do. She bundled downstairs with her duvet but her mother didn't seem to be around either. It was rainy lightly outside and dark despite it being so late in the year, she could easily go back to sleep but she was still feeling emotional, and restless, about last night. She lay on the couch but sleep wouldn't come. She had had too much of it.

Instead she phoned her dad.

"Hello dad."



“Julia, it’s the middle of the night here.”

“Then why did you answer?”

“I thought it might be your mother.”

*Gosh, thanks*, “Well, it’s not it’s *just* me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that – I meant that I thought maybe something had happened to her, otherwise who else would phone at this time of night?”

Julia felt like saying something *had* happened to her, that the woman was having a midlife crisis, about fifteen years too late, but she restrained herself, instead she asked how he was. They talked for awhile, besides the quick chat yesterday she hadn’t spoken to her dad for quite a long time, she often forgot to. He was that type of person. With her mother there was always drama so you just couldn’t forget but not with her dad. He had once said that he sometimes felt like maybe he had to jump off a bridge just to get any sort of attention in their family. Julia had thought he was joking but she wasn’t sure. It was just after he had some small surgery and, still, her mother was taking centre stage with some nonsense, the fact that Julia couldn’t even remember what surgery just went to show. The nonsense she remembered, it was to do with the tiles in the bathroom.

Julia had always felt a bit sorry for her dad. She was pretty sure he suffered from depression but just tried to keep it under the radar because her mother wouldn’t have been able to handle it. Definitely not then and probably not now either. She remembered when she was little asking her dad what was wrong, he had said “Nothing Jules, I’m just feeling depressed.” When she had asked him why he had responded, “I don’t know, I just am.” She hadn’t understood and had told him how she never really felt depressed and when she did she always knew why. All he had said was “Lucky you, I hope that doesn’t change.”

Of course her mother must have been depressed too, or something, why else turn to booze like she had? Her dad still took a sleeping tablet every night in order to sleep. He didn’t take antidepressants but he was religious about his sleeping tablets.

The more she spoke to her father the more she got the sense that he hadn’t told Tim that Josephine would be here quite this long because he himself hadn’t realised she would be here *quite* this long. In fact, it didn’t even sound like Josephine had really

even told him that she was having difficulties with the relationship and wanted time to think things through, more that she had just claimed she was going on holiday. Julia hated that she was the one telling her father that her mother, his wife, was on a break from *their* marriage. But what had he thought after all this time? He had suspected but he wasn't sure and he was more than a bit in denial about it.

Julia had been hoping that her mother wouldn't still be there by Christmas or that she at least wouldn't be staying with them. She had come over for Christmas before but she had usually done that cheap deal where you fly on Christmas day so they had only seen her on Boxing Day. But Julia knew this had been wishful thinking. There were no signs of her mother going back to the US any time soon and who would she say with in Cape Town if not them? She had barely any friends left here from the old days and the friends she had made at church recently were all too new. And Julia was rather relieved she wasn't staying with Paul.

To begin with she wanted her gone because she knew she wouldn't be able to be spoilt if Josephine was around, she would ruin it all with her guilt trips. It was true what they said about Catholics and no truer than for their children. Plus there had been big talk about the twelve steps and how this time of year was particularly hard for those in the programme. She had thought that perhaps she could convince her to work at a soup kitchen, at least over the New Year? The programme always had volunteer work going. Except then Josephine would probably drag her along with her. Now, however, she wanted her to go back so that she could sort things out with her dad.

There was the added issue that she knew what to get her mother. Usually this didn't matter quite as much but this year she would be around to see her reaction. She wanted to spoil her too and so would Mark. She had worked hard all her life. But she just wouldn't let them buy her anything fancy. There was always some comment. Occasionally, for the few times Josephine did come for Christmas, she would dredge out all the things her mother had ever made her and place them around the house. But Josephine had been here since November and they hadn't been out so there was no use pretending now.

Given that things had been too awkward the night before to open presents together Mark had suggested it after he had come home from work with a rather large glass of whiskey in his hand, a glass, Julia noticed, he had refilled. Now they were all sitting under the tree a bit sheepishly.

She had ended up buying her mother a lipstick for Christmas. She always hated it when other people bought her makeup – she felt that it was such a personal thing that you just couldn't have anyone choosing it for you. But this time she thought it would be okay. She was her daughter after all, how much more personal could you get? Her mother barely ever wore makeup, or at least not in Julia's memory of her mother, she was always the no nonsense nurse. But lately, when they had stayed up together watching a movie, just the two of them, with Mark either working late or already in bed because he had worked so late the night before, she had said things like "I wish I could wear lipstick like that, it's such a nice colour." Julia always replied "You can mom, why can't you?" To which her mother had responded something along the lines of "I don't know, it just never seemed practical, it always rubs off and I never had time to apply it when I was working." But she wasn't working anymore.

They usually watched romcoms if she had pre-recorded enough of them, otherwise B-list thrillers. Mainly because thrillers and bad documentaries were the only things that were on that late, but if they hit too close to home one of them would change the channel without saying a word. They never spoke about Tim or his time in prison to each other.

When she went to the shops to look for a lipstick she had a really hard time finding the right one. She wanted a deep red or purple, nothing too bright or showy, to ease her in. All the reds had names like "Tramp" or "Heat" or "Luscious" and she just knew that her mother would look at the bottom and read the name and never wear it after that. In the end she chose a plum coloured one called "Bruised". Where the makers of these things came up with the names was anybody's guess. Surely no one thought the name "Bruised" was sexy? But, then again, Julia wasn't going for sexy when shopping for her mother.

Julia was impressed, Josephine had actually taken the time to think through a gift for Mark. She was expecting soap on the rope or another bottle of liquor but she

had bought him a recipe book by one of the fancy French cooks he watched on TV. Julia had no idea who the guy was, she refused to watch Mark's cooking shows with him on the weekends because they always made her hungry and she would end up eating the whole way through the programme. Josephine clearly didn't mind though and Mark looked truly happy paging through it. Julia could tell he was making a mental note of which recipes he wanted to try first. It had broken the ice.

When Josephine opened the gift from Julia she seemed to like it well enough, Julia thought. The only weird comment she made was when she looked at the bottom and noticed the name.

"Bruised, well that's fitting, I am bruised." Julia, surprising herself actually had to hide a grin, her mother was just so dramatic sometimes, it reminded her of a time, when she was about thirteen and they had been driving, windows rolled down on a hot summer's day, past a big open lawn. A gardener was spraying the lawn and some of the spray blew into the window, her mother had shouted, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

To which the man had replied calmly, "I'm spraying the weeds."

Josephine, shouting even louder now exclaimed, "WELL DO I LOOK LIKE A WEED TO YOU?!" And had driven off. Of course Tim had muttered under his breath "yes" as any nine year old would. Things were more normal then. Tim could be a snarky nine year old and Julia could be a shy teenager and no one minded much.

She had bought Mark a fancy watch. He was always asking her the time and it drove her mad. He never had his phone on hand to just check the screen and even though Julia herself didn't wear a watch he would ask her the time, or to time one of his dishes, at least three times a day. He got her a dishwasher, which he added was "for both of them".

Julia opened her present from her mother as they both sat on the couch. Her mother was wearing the *Tommy Hilfiger* scarf she bought her last Christmas that she was sure she never wore otherwise and which was especially strange seeing as it was summer in South Africa.

"I knew how much you loved them and how sad you were when they were ruined."

They were the Christian Louboutins.

“Thanks mom! I love them!” They must have cost her mother a fortune. She knew exactly how much they had cost last year and even on sale a year later they would have been a lot. But she also knew she would never wear them. The other pair had been completely fixable, all they needed was a wipe down, but for some reason she couldn’t bear to look at them. She didn’t even want to touch them. She smiled again and placed them on the floor.

Later she asked Mark to take the presents to the bedroom. She couldn’t keep walking into the lounge and seeing them there. Then she decided she would speak to her mother who was busy taking down the Christmas tree. She had decided she would talk to her mother only about five minutes ago but she had to go with it now, if she put it off until later she would definitely change her mind.

“Mom, you need to call dad. He doesn’t know you’re separated.”

“Neither did I.” Julia gave her a funny look.

“Okay, well what *are* you doing then?”

“We’re just on a bit of a break. It’s not the same thing.”

“Well, I don’t think he even realizes that, not truly, he thinks you’re just on vacation,” Julia had thought the same thing but it had been too long now and if she got her mother to admit it wasn’t “just a holiday” and that she was going to stay in Cape Town, well then maybe she could get her to move out and if she moved out she would have to get her own place and then she would have to tell her dad. Financially she definitely would have to, even if she didn’t feel she owed him that emotionally. She couldn’t stay with them indefinitely. “I mean, what’s going on with Paul?”

“Paul? Oh nothing really. He doesn’t make an effort. He said he would try and be more open to Catholicism but then he didn’t even come to midnight mass. And he bought me chrysanthemums – the most unromantic of flowers, in yellow – the most unromantic of colours. Plus he was late for lunch.” Julia didn’t remind her mom that none of them even knew he was coming for lunch and that, maybe, next time, it might be nice if they had some forewarning when her mother’s boyfriend was coming over. She didn’t remind her because her mother was finally saying more than just what she was asked.

“I stayed with your father a very long time – moved to the states with him when he couldn’t get a good enough job over here and we knew I would be paid better over there. I left my daughter here, alone. We went over there because he wanted to. And it was *their* public school system that did it to Tim. The public schools there aren’t like they are here. You were lucky you stayed here. I wish we all could have.”

Julia had wished she could have gone with. She inhaled, she wasn’t used to seeing her mother like this, so open and so vulnerable. “And I stayed with him all that time because I felt too guilty to leave. He had stayed with me through my alcoholism, through all of that, I owed it to him. And, when I had eventually had enough, when I had decided I could finally leave, it had been long enough, well, then the thing with Tim happened. And then I had to stay. Again.”

Julia was shocked, “But you and dad are fine, I thought you didn’t really fight much anymore?”

“We’re *fine*, yes. Our relationship is dull. We’re like brother and sister. We love each other but there isn’t much more there. Some people are fine with dull, even comfortable with it. But I don’t want to be comfortable with it.”

## Julia

Julia woke up one morning and New Years had past and her mother was *still* there. And she was still telling her how hard this time of year was for those in the programme. She didn't need telling, she had lived it. Every time her mother tried to remind her she wanted to, in turn, remind her of that one New Years when she was fourteen. But she was too scared to. She was scared that her mom didn't remember Julia being involved and that if she told her it might bring up some long lost deep seated memory that didn't get along with all the other ones.

After her father had said he was leaving her if she didn't get sober Julia had helped her mom out of fear. She had helped her keep it a secret from him. Carrying her off to the bathroom every night, cleaning up the vomit and then getting a lift in to school with him every morning in a silent car.

But if her mom didn't remember this then she understood why she had never asked for forgiveness or apologised, it's hard to ask for forgiveness for something you don't remember doing.

That one New Years was worse than the on and off nights in the week when Julia would help her mom. That New Years she had drunk so much they had had to take her to hospital. And their dad couldn't get anyone to look after them so she and Tim had to go along too. The place was packed and they sat around for hours while Trevor filled out paperwork and Josephine had her stomach pumped, Tim pulling at bits of stuffing that were peaking out of the old brown seats they were resting on, too nervous and uncomfortable to fall asleep. The next day Josephine had told them a story about food poisoning and Trevor said nothing.

Mark had worked right up into and through the new year and although he had said that there was "just a lot to do" Julia thought he was avoiding being in the house with Josephine, or rather, her and Josephine. He had hinted that he found their lying around all day depressing. They were watching daytime television, nobody wanted

piano lessons around Christmas and New Years and Josephine was still claiming to be on vacation. There was a soapie on with a dramatic love triangle.

“How did you and dad meet?”

“Through your dad’s best friend, Greg, who was dating aunt Joan. We had wanted a double wedding.”

“But aunty Joan and Greg broke up, and you and dad stayed together?”

“Well, clearly, Joan is married to Willem.”

“Oh, right, how did dad propose?” She was surprised she didn’t know this already and that she hadn’t asked befo

“He didn’t really, I fell pregnant and then he had to marry me. I was lying in the bath and he was in the room next door. He was shouting about a job he had been offered in Cape Town and would I go with him and I shouted back that I would but only if he married me first, and then added the bit about the baby.”

“What?” She was shocked that her mother, the Catholic, had had sex before marriage, and she was just as shocked that she hadn’t known her mother had been pregnant with her at the wedding. Had she never done the maths? Those bulky eighties dresses sure hid a lot. Her mother didn’t hear her, or at least she pretended not to but she really couldn’t believe it, how casually she had just told her all of this, after all the years of guilt she had given Julia about her divorce and everything else and here she was, no angel.

Josephine, unaware of just how much shock she was causing her daughter, was thinking about the first time she met Trevor. It had been on her day off from nursing school and Greg and her sister, Joan, had come over with Trevor in tow, bleeding from the head and asking her to take a look. “What happened?”

“We were at a garage sale and a disco ball fell on his head,” Greg explained.

“And then?” she asked.

“I took it as a sign and bought the ball,” this from a concussed Trevor. When they had moved to Cape Town and rented their first flat together they had taken the ball with them. It had hung in their shower for years until Julia had accidentally knocked it down and smashed it. She had heard the story of how they met and the ball multiple times but somehow missed the proposal. Josephine, when she thought back, sometimes



held onto some resentment. If she hadn't fallen pregnant would her life have turned out this way, would she have married Trevor? Maybe not. It was in times like these that she felt like drinking. Alcohol was one of the few things that could numb the mix of nostalgia and sorrow she felt.

"Listen, there is a meeting in twenty minutes, I'm going to go, do you want to come with?"

"Ah, okay." The response came out before Julia could really decide if she did or didn't want to go. She was still very much in shock over her mother's unplanned pregnancy. A pregnancy that had resulted in her birth.

In the meeting Julia found herself zoning out most of the time despite the probably horrific stories that were being told. She just couldn't stop thinking about her mother. She seemed like a different person to her. Someone who didn't do everything quite as by the book as she always thought. Even when she had admitted to being an alcoholic she had still managed to keep her holier than thou appearance going, telling them how it was very unusual for someone to be able to get sober all on their own, without going to a clinic or having a proper sponsor. After everyone had finished talking her mother disappeared leaving her to the doughnuts again. She mindlessly picked one up and took a bite. Just as she did so she turned and saw someone she knew. She raised her eyebrows in recognition and then waved. She had no idea who it was, she just knew that she knew him and she waved instinctively. He waved back, almost as though he was doing it by accident, and turned away fast. She didn't follow him, he didn't seem like that was what he wanted. Instead she went to try and find her mom. She had just had the brainwave of suggesting she go and stay with her aunt Joan for a while. She was only in Joburg which really wasn't far. And maybe when she phoned Joan she could ask her about her mother's past. Did her mom blame her for stealing her youth? Or for forever tying her to her father?

She didn't have to go out of her way to look for her mother. She heard her before she saw her. She could hear her strictly reprimanding someone in the hallway. On inspection it was Paul.

## Roger

*Shit.* He had seen Mark's wife at AA. If she told Mark he was done for. There was no way he would get away with his lies if Mark knew this. Mark was asking questions about his sobriety but now he would have proof. And there had been one verbal warning already. He had made the mistake of sharing at this meeting and had told a story about how he had locked himself in a toilet cubicle at work and then passed out. He hadn't said where he worked but if she recognised him she would know. And he had gone up to collect a two week chip which meant she could work out that he hadn't been sober at the time when Mark had given him the warning and he had lied to say he was. There he was at AA, trying to do a good thing, and this is what happened. What was the point?

He left and went home before she could spot him again. There was half a bottle of vodka under his bed. He thought he might as well drink it now because he was going to drink it sometime anyway. He had gone to AA to try and get back on track - he had slipped up after Mark had caught him stealing and a few times afterwards - but AA tonight had been a mistake. If he finished off the vodka he could start over from day one again tomorrow. He was only on day fourteen - what was the difference? He would start again tomorrow. If he wanted to. Although he wasn't sure he cared anymore.

When Mark had thought he was catching Roger stealing what he was actually witnessing was Roger returning the money he had taken. He wasn't an idiot he knew the administrator checked the petty cash every Friday before she left work. But he had really needed a loan and when he had casually tried to mention his money problems to his mother she had been oblivious and he was too proud to ask straight out. Besides, he worked in finance, he had studied to be an accountant, he should be able to sort his own financial problems out. It was just to pay for his rent. He was only a thousand rand short and he was getting paid on Thursday. He had been late paying last month and the month before that and his landlord was ready to fine him. Or kick him out.

He knew he shouldn't have signed the lease on this fancy apartment. But he was so happy when he got this job and he had never lived by himself before. He had no idea about living expenses. These were his last semi coherent thoughts before he fell into a deep, dark, sleep, at 11:43 pm. When he woke up it was very bright. The sun streaming through the curtains he had forgotten to close was what had woken him. *Shiiiiitttt*.

He had no more leave days left and it was almost noon – if he was going to call in sick he should have done it by now. He looked at his phone – why hadn't his alarm gone off? Because he hadn't set it. Although it probably wouldn't have made much of a difference he had three missed calls which he had slept clean through. He listen to the first one, something about a meeting, he couldn't face listening to the rest. Denial, he thought, was the best way forward here.

He got up, not because he wanted to, he would much rather lie around for another hour whilst he decided what to do, but he was desperate for the toilet. As he stood up his foot knocked over a beer bottle. He didn't remember drinking beer last night. He didn't even remember having beer in the house. His stomach was growling so he opened the fridge. Unsurprisingly there was little to no food in there. He couldn't remember the last time he had been grocery shopping. There was some leftover Chinese food but it looked old and it was mainly just plain noodles. And then he saw them, there, in the side of the fridge door, was a row of three ice cold beers. And it was hot out, he could do with some cooling down, plus it was almost twelve o'clock, by anyone's standards that was very much the afternoon.

He downed one, two and before he knew it three. When he finished the third he looked around, he was sure he had only drunk two, that he had another one to go, but disappointingly no, there were no more beers left in the house, they had disappeared just as mysteriously as they had appeared. It was about quarter past now and he needed a plan of action. Perhaps he could phone work and say he had a family emergency? Did he get compassionate leave? If it sounded like enough of an emergency he could maybe get away with "having not had time to phone in until now," But if that was the case then he could phone in a couple of hours, that would give him enough time to get his story straight.

Seeing as there was no way he was going into work today, and that it was a Friday, and that it was lovely and sunny out, he would make the most of the day. He decided to walk down to the shops to buy some food.

He was walking back digging into his six-pack when he had an idea. It was just going three o'clock, Mark would still be at the office, even on a Friday. He walked towards the offices. They weren't far from where he was now. He would call Mark out, pretend he was a client, and send him on a bit of a wild goose chase. He would give him a fake address. Maybe 102 Buitengracht Street, he knew from experience that it didn't exist after someone once told him to go to 102 Buitengracht instead of Buitenkant. He liked this idea. If he was going to be fired because of something Mark said about him at AA then he might as well get his own back before he went.

He phoned, put on a British accent, gave the wrong address and sat outside on a bench drinking another beer while he waited for Mark's car to drive out of the garage and away. Mark hadn't been there when he called so he had left a message. But he didn't have to wait long until he recognised the obnoxiously bright red sports car driving out.

Roger found a lot of glee in this. He felt the power reverse. This is what Mark must feel over him every day. Then he decided he would go and visit his mom, he missed her.

But by the time he walked back to his apartment he had the good sense to realise he probably shouldn't drive so, instead, he phoned her and proved he was a disappointment to her over the sound waves rather than in person.

## **Mark**

Mark received a strange message from a client with an equally strange accent. He would have given the call-out to a more junior insurer, he didn't usually do these, but Mark felt like getting out of the office for a bit. It was a Friday and perhaps, just this once, after the call he could leave a tiny bit early and go straight home. Julia was having a dinner party and she was cooking which meant she would need as much support as he could give her.

Naturally, what he thought would be a quick call out, just down the road from the office, turned into a long schlep. The offices he was visiting were meant to be at 102 Buitengracht but he just couldn't find them. Luckily, for him, the police station wasn't far from where he was and there was an officer patrolling. After driving around a while he went up to her and asked for directions. She told him to perhaps try Buitenkant and he agreed after asking her the time, which was half past four. He made his way to 102 Buitenkant only to be turned away by a secretary who had no idea who or what he was referring to. He looked at his watch, it was already five. Julia would be disappointed.

## Julia

Julia was trying to wave her mother away. Knowing her mother would never contact aunt Joan, even after he countless hints, she had contacted her aunt for her, asking her to *please* invite her mother up for a few weeks. At first Joan was resistant, she was cross that Josephine hadn't phoned her once since landing in South Africa. But Julia had explained that she wouldn't go near the telephone and that letters were probably best. Julia couldn't wait to have the house without her. She had invited friends round for dinner tonight to celebrate and she was making one of the less fussy dishes from Mark's new cookbook.

She was going to try a spring vegetable paella, she had been told that it was the Spanish version of risotto only easier, "you just fry it all up, none of that stirring and waiting, and adding buckets of stock." Going grocery shopping was a new hobby of hers. Mark had always done it in the past but she had started to do it every now and again, mainly to get away from Josephine, and she found she quite liked it. But, only if she wasn't forced to go - then it became and chore. She liked to wander down each aisle. She enjoyed the way they were organized, she organised her grocery list in the same way, diary, veg, meat, bakery, non perishables, toiletries, cleaning products, chocolate/luxuries. And when she packed her groceries she tried to do the same with the bags, one bag for diary, one for veg and so on. It was the one part of her life that she felt she could easily coordinate. She felt extremely relaxed that day as she went from lane to lane, pushing her trolley. Her thoughts lingered on the names of vegetables and not her normal anxieties.

She needed peas, carrots mushrooms, zucchini and aubergine. They had the mushrooms but only baby marrows and eggplant. Were those the same? And what about brinjal? And if so why not just name them baby marrow and eggplant, those names were a lot simpler.

She took them over to the scales and when the man weighing them pressed the button she tried to see what he chose, she missed it, but it didn't matter, on the printed out label that it said "brinjal" and "courgettes" so maybe they were interchangeable? She would use those names anyway, they sounded fancier. A brinjal and courgette paella.

Next meat, she got some chicken. They always ate chicken. And Mark could freeze it if he didn't want it this week, although he would, he was a creature of habit. Bakery? No, she must resist bread. What would Vishana say? Well, probably nothing seeing as Vishana wasn't speaking to her. She wondered if Sam had told her. She had invited them both to tonight's dinner but she hadn't heard back from them. But, no, she wouldn't think about this now. Back to produce.

Non perishables were next. Mark wanted tinned tomatoes and chickpeas, what else was in this aisle? Boxed goods, cereals, and oh, Ultra Mel.

When Mark and Julia first started dating they had gone to some fancy restaurant for dinner where Mark had ordered the crème brûlée for dessert. She was pretty sure he didn't actually want dessert, he had had a huge steak and she already knew he didn't have much of a sweet tooth, but he was doing it for her, her eyes had lit up at the dessert menu and the cakes behind the glass.

After three frowned spoonfuls Mark spluttered "Eurg."

"What?" She had asked timidly, she somehow felt responsible for him not liking his dessert, her presence being the only reason he had ordered it.

"It tastes like they've used Ultra Mel custard in this and set it alight, maybe sprinkled some sugar on top."

"Oh," she laughed "I love Ultra Mel." She didn't really *love*, love it but growing up their mom had been a no-sugar type of mom and on occasion, when she was in a good mood she had bought them Ultra Mel as a special treat, and she liked the thought of it. Later their mom had only ever been happy when she was drunk and that had made her into a no-food-in-the-house sort of mom unless they were out and she insisted on buying everybody ice-cream. She would force vanilla cones on everybody, aggressively, as though they could make up for other digressions. A trip to the mall and

an ice-cream. And then she got sober, Julia went to boarding school, they moved away, and she was stuck with cafeteria food.

On their next date, their fourth, Mark picked her up and when he got out of the car to open the door for her he handed her, from behind his back, a big box of Ultra Mel with a red ribbon tied around it. He was just that type of guy back then, so thoughtful. He would always joke around with her and call it “vile stuff” but he still bought it for her, even years later when she no longer had a taste for it.

When she got home she started with the chopping. Mark was meant to have been there by now to help her but she could at least chop things without any assistance. Or so she thought when, listening too intently to a talk show on the radio, her hand slid from cutting a carrot and met with her finger. She remembered she had just bought plasters but had left them in the grocery bag in the hall. She had stocked up on a lot of household things she usually took for granted would always be around.

She went to fetch the plasters and found she had left some key ingredients in there with the sun from the hallway window beating down on them. These included the zucchini and a hard block of parmesan that she could start grating while she waited for Mark. There was also a bottle of white wine that was meant to go in the food but which she might just have a glass of now. But remembered that she probably shouldn't.

When they found her body there were three zucchinis rolling around next to her.



PART TWO:  
MOTIVES

## Mark

When Mark found Julia she was lying in the kitchen on his raincoat, covered in blood. Or so he told the police. What was strangest of all was that all the doors were locked and there was no sign of forced entry. Except for the front door which Mark swore he had to unlock before he came in, that it wasn't open already. Although, it may have been better for his story if he had said it was open when he got there. But he couldn't think about that. He couldn't try and come up with a story or think through what had happened. All he could think about was Julia. Or, rather, her lifeless body, to him they were not one and the same.

When the police found Mark he was standing over Julia's body in the passageway, barefoot. He wasn't cradling her or touching her in any way. He was almost recoiling from her. The body seemed to Mark to both be Julia and not be her. In some ways it looked just like her when she was sleeping but, in other ways, it looked like a completely different person. A person devoid of her life, of her breath, of her energy. Her eyelashes didn't flicker while she lay there and her mouth didn't open and emit small sighs, or breaths, she just lay, deflated and sallow looking. And he didn't want to be near it.

The raincoat thing was strange. Was Julia on her way out and just about to put it on? But it was summer. Was the killer trying to save the white carpet? But for what. It seemed Julia must have known the killer to let them into the locked house. If Mark was to be believed.

The police thought it was a bit strange that Mark had no blood on him. If he had he may have seemed guiltier but he also may have seemed more human. In their experience loved ones usually rushed to the body and tried to shake it back to life, they clung to them and sobbed. But here was Mark clean and standing in a corner far away from it.

He could barely look at it. It was tainting the image he had of his wife.

His first thought, he told police when he found the body, was suicide, but he quickly replaced it with his second which was a robbery gone wrong. The police could find nothing missing, however, and Mark could think of no one else who would want to harm his wife.

He wanted to go up to their bedroom and go to sleep, to put his head in her pillow, but every time he asked the police if he could go they seemed to be annoyed and surprised that he could “sleep at a time like this”.

And then the alibi thing hadn’t gone too well. He had one, sure, but they thought it was all too convenient. He thought it was perfect: his alibi was another police officer. The female officer he had stopped and asked for directions. They wanted more details and elaborations and he wanted soft duvets and drugs - the sleeping tablets Julia kept in a little box on her dressing table - and a closed mind.

But the police had this idea that he had purposefully stopped and asked the officer for directions so that he would have an alibi. This was mainly because she had told them that when he had asked her for the time she had noticed that, actually, he was wearing a watch and could have looked at it rather than stop and ask her. It also meant she would know the exact time he saw her proving that it would have been hard for him to make it back in time to kill Julia. Which was all too convenient as an alibi. He tried to explain that his main reason for stopping her was for directions and added that he wasn’t used to wearing a watch, he had forgotten it was there on account of the fact that his dearly beloved wife had only just given it to him for Christmas.

Then they seemed to think that maybe he had made the whole phone call up. That someone may have phoned at that time but that no one had given him any bogus address and if they had why would he go? He was a senior member in the company, he could have sent anyone in his place, he didn’t normally do call-outs. Unfortunately he had deleted the voice message.

He thought about just agreeing to everything they said so that he could go upstairs. But thought better of it. His eyes were drooping and his mind was closed. He didn’t think to ask for a lawyer and the police didn’t want to let him go in case the next time they saw him he was better prepared.

They seemed to have worked out that if he had just run out into the street and asked the first police woman he saw what the time was and then ran back, jumped in his car, and got home to the flat he would have had at least thirty minutes in which to kill his wife before Sarah and John arrived, just on time as usual.

Which is when he made up the thing about Mr. Evans. Mr. Evans had a big account with the company and anyone, even a senior member, *especially* a senior member, would jump if he said so. Of course he was in danger of them just phoning Mr. Evans and asking him if he had phoned which was why he was so happy when he found out that the phone call had been completely made up one by none other than Roger.

But he found this out days later. For now he was fine with his lie. He wanted out. He would deal with the consequences later. They were speaking to him in his kitchen and he had glimpses of the passageway from there. He could see a flash going off every now and then and every time he looked towards it he saw a foot, illuminated for a split second, in a broken high heel.

“What time exactly did you get home?”

He didn’t know, hadn’t he just told them he wasn’t used to wearing a watch. *Flash*. The camera went off again focusing his eyes away from the police and back to the passage: a middle toe sticking out from the peep-toe part of the shoe.

“And Sarah and John Phillips?”

But surely they had asked them? *Flash*. And the heel appeared again. How sad, he thought, Julia would be when she found out her shoe was broken.

When he did piece the information about Roger and him placing the call it wasn’t through the police. They hadn’t told him anything. They wouldn’t. But he had read about it in the papers. It didn’t say everything straight out but he put it together. If Roger had made a prank call to him giving a fake address, which it seemed he had more or less admitted to, well then it would be easy enough for the police to believe that Roger had said the account with the made-up address was in Mr. Evans’ name.

He would get up in the mornings and read the papers first thing. They were his main source of information as to what was going on. He avoided watching the news - they showed too many photos of Julia's body. Sometimes he would have to flick the channels very fast if a programme changed and he was in danger of it coming on – he was getting good at this. He was very careful when sitting down on the couch to place the remote close to him and within eyeshot. The papers seemed to stick to photos of her, as an actual person, photos from their wedding and one from her high school piano recital, titling her as a well loved piano teacher. They were safer.

He was lonely. The voices from the TV comforted him to some degree. Work had told him to take some time off. He wasn't sure if it was because they thought he needed the leave or because they didn't want to be associated with the scandal. He had heard Roger was off from work too - again this was from the papers. He was at home, their home, with too much spare time. Josephine had decided not to stay with him when she got back to Cape Town and he tried to phone the BnB to speak to her both for company and news that wasn't from a paper or a voice that wasn't from a TV.

"I'm sorry, she's out." This for the third time and after a long pause in which, Mark suspected, they had asked Josephine what she wanted them to say. Where did she think he would think she could be at a time like this? Surely she was stuck to staying at home wondering if the police would call, like he was.

He phoned back half an hour later and this time asked to speak to Joan, who answered.

"How is Josephine?"

"Not great. Her child is dead." Mark wanted to respond with "and *my* wife." But instead asked, "do you have any news?"

"We know less than you." She said this a rather accusatory way and then made an excuse to go, something about taking Josephine out – probably so that he would know not to phone back for her.

So he was stuck to the apartment that he had inhabited with Julia with no one but the characters on his TV. He had spent one night at a three star hotel while they had searched his home. It was the first night and he had craved his own apartment badly.

Everything at the hotel seemed cold and clinical. He wanted comfort and familiarity. But when he went back things were too familiar. Familiar but wrong. The bedroom had its moments. At times it seemed like a place of deep loneliness whereas at others it seemed to welcome him into its soft cushiony interior where he would fall, comfortably into sleep. He seemed to always be tired. Perhaps this was due to how often he would wake in the night. Sometimes he would wake up and turn on his side expecting to find Julia there breathing softly next to him. Other times he would wake up and remember that something awful had happened, for a minute he might think it was a dream, but then he would remember again. In these times the bedroom was his intimate enemy. And he would take his duvet down to the couch and watch TV, staring at the screen and not taking much of it in, until he fell asleep again.

He liked the kitchen almost all of the time. He didn't like it in an openly happy way but he liked to be in a space that had not changed much with Julia's absence. She had never spent much time in there and the space provided him with tasks to do and no sad memories.

He had taken to trying out all the weird meals that Julia would never eat, or the ones she complained took too long to cook, now that he had nothing but time. He would seek out all the unusual groceries at the unusual stores he never managed to get to before. And he would spend hours cooking, a good time slowly eating and then there was still the washing up to take his mind off things.

One Tuesday afternoon while he was cooking lunch two detectives came over.

"That smells nice, what is it?"

"Roast duck with blue cheese."

"Celebrating something?"

"No, of course not." They then proceeded to question him about the raincoat. Did he ever wear the raincoat in the shower? Did he ever sit in the raincoat naked except for it, while watching TV?

"Where are you getting this from?"

"Someone at your company told us you showered with a raincoat on."

Another one of the stupid office jokes. It used to be "Mark is such a prude he won't even get naked to have sex with his wife". Then it changed to "Mark is such a

prude he won't even get naked to shower". Only somehow, now, the raincoat from the scene of the crime had been involved.

Later, that evening, he sat down to watch one of the chick-flicks Julia had saved. He did this sometimes, thinking it might bring him closer to her and wishing he had done it more when she was alive. He even ate his fancy meal on his lap in front of the TV – something he would have berated her for – before going upstairs to get her pillow and reclining back on it.

At some point he fell asleep only to wake again during the final scene, that of a wedding. His eyes automatically darted towards the mantelpiece, their wedding photo was absent.

He kept telling the police how he had no motive. Julia didn't have money, neither of them were having an affair to the best of his knowledge, Josephine could attest to the fact that they didn't have marital problems, at least no more than anybody else. But the police seemed to believe that marriage itself was motive enough. And he knew the motto of all true crime buffs, "it was the husband."

When he had told them that he thought it could have been a burglary gone wrong they had asked him what had been taken, "Only our wedding photo and the pair of diamond studs I bought her for Christmas last year." This didn't go down well, the missing wedding photo was a sign of problems in the relationship but would Mark really have told them it was missing if he had taken it? He shouldn't have said anything, they would never have known it was there.

He had wondered about it. Had Julia done something with it? Why would she have? Had she been having an affair and a jealous lover had taken it? He fleetingly thought that maybe she had been terribly unhappy and had burnt it, or something, before taking her own life. But Julia seemed like the type of person who would write a suicide letter. And why had she recorded so many romcoms if she wasn't going to watch them?

Truly they were hundreds of them. He clicked on the next one on the list without taking in the name and lay back down.

## Vishana

Vishana had almost grown used to hating Julia for something she wasn't even completely sure she had done. It came as a surprise to her when these emotions were suddenly replaced with a deep sadness and a longing for their friendship. In some ways she had expected that they would have some sort of conclusion to their friendship, perhaps a big blow up, but suddenly it had all ended. It had been taken away from Vishana. Her closest friend. She had half assumed, taken it for granted, that they would one day be friends again. She had never truly written her off but now she had no choice. It wasn't up to her, or to Julia, or to Sam for that matter, how their friendship ended. She realised, that to a degree, she had been blaming Julia for Sam's actions.

But she had other, more practical, issues to worry about. Things that she could still, hopefully, change the outcome of.

Vishana came up with a plan. Like so many things in her life she didn't tell Sam about it. She knew he wouldn't approve. She went with the poor-widowed-man theme and made Mark a huge veg casserole that she put it in a large carrier bag on top of the delivered box. Then, when she had a moment, possibly while Mark was putting the casserole in the fridge, she would place the delivery somewhere.

She got to the door and knocked, Mark was there and answered, all very quickly.

"Uh, hello Mark, how are you?" Not the best question. She suddenly realized she barely knew Mark. And he barely knew her. What had Julia told him about *her* during their fight? Not to mention what she might have said about her husband, Sam.

He didn't answer instead he just looked at her sadly.

"I made you a meal," it had seemed like a thing people did when she had thought up the plan, but maybe it wasn't? Maybe it was very old fashioned, not to mention a bit sexist. And she could smell Mark was cooking something as they spoke. Something that smelt a lot better than her low-fat veggie and fake cheese bake.



“Thank you,” oh no, he was taking the bag by the handles, the whole bag, she was meant to be invited in with it.

“That smells nice.” She said genuinely.

“Thank you, sorry I don’t mean to be rude but the soufflés are very finicky, I really do have to keep an eye on them.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You wouldn’t want to stay for dinner would you?”

“Oh, uh, I would love that,” she really didn’t want to, but what other choice did she have, she needed to get inside, without breaking in this time. He led her in. The passage floor was stained a deep red and the fluffy white carpet that had once been there had been removed. She noticed that he didn’t walk through the red stain but rather around it. They went to the kitchen, where, to her luck a timer was going off. Mark put down the bag and went straight to the oven, she picked it up, in the guise of looking helpful, took the dish out, popped it in the fridge and quickly hid the rest under the table as he turned around. Vishana had hardly been in the kitchen before. She thought she might have been in here once to get a bottle of wine but she hadn’t taken much in. Even when she had broken in she had simply walked past it. It had always seemed like Mark’s domain and somehow private. But it was very nice, modern, clean and open.

The soufflés were ready almost as soon as she sat down, and she was glad, she felt uncomfortable, like a spy hanging out with Julia’s husband when Julia wasn’t here and they were still in a fight. Mark sat down with his back to the passage. When she stretched to reach a knife she got a glimpse of the red stained wood again. She retreated back and focused on Mark.

Little did she know that the soufflés were only the first course and there was still a second and a third to come. She would be here for ages, she wondered if Sam would worry about her when he got home from work and saw she wasn’t there, but she had her phone, he could call her if he wanted to. She kept accidentally glancing at the stain and then making eye contact with Mark when she tried to look away from it. He didn’t say much. They ate slowly and in silence. She wanted to eat fast but she forced herself to take smaller mouthfuls, to chew more, even though she didn’t really need to chew much, with it being a soufflé.

As she sat, and sat, she realised that Mark had the bladder of whatever the opposite of a race horse was. She just needed him to leave for a few seconds so she could get rid of the package. Then maybe she could make some sort of excuse and leave. Her foot kept making contact with the bag under the table and every time it did so she winced with anxiety. She wished she had bought along a bottle of wine that she could pour for him to speed things up, but she hadn't and it seemed a bit presumptuous to offer him one of his own, of which she could see he had plenty sitting in a rack near the kitchen door. She occasionally made contact with them instead of Mark or the stain.

"So, um, do you do a lot of cooking?" She knew he did, Julia had told her how she hated cooking but how it didn't matter because Mark loved it. It was like that thing with the martini, one person had to love martinis and the other had to love olives so that they could feed the things to them. Sam and her both hated olives, but they also hated martinis so it didn't really matter. He placed a dish in front of her. It did seem slightly strange that he was doing this much cooking, and such fancy food, at such a time. Her low fat veg casserole looked very plain next to this second course. She wasn't sure what it was exactly but she could tell it was fancy. She would go on an extra long run tomorrow - she could see what appeared to be cream mixed in there.

"Yes, I guess I don't usually have that much time for it though, but now all I have is time," he paused and looked down at his plate, "this is a recipe from a cookery book Julia bought me, I think she wanted me to make it for her, it had a little star drawn next to it in pencil." The mood took a turn for the even sadder and Vishana found herself staring, absentmindedly, at the wine again. Mark followed her gaze, "Would you like a drink?" She refocused and realized what she was staring at.

"Only if you're having?" and to her relief he nodded and got out two glasses. Somewhere around half way through the third course, crème brûlée, Mark even had a blowtorch, another gift from Julia, Vishana realized she had drunk too much, she barely ever drunk so almost anything more than one was going to set her off the edge. But she had just been so awkward and so eager to get Mark to drink, that she had gone along with it.

As he stared at his blow-torched custard he said "I was never the one who had the sweet tooth," and it was not the first time that night that she had seen him with tears

in his eyes. Then he started telling her some story about a pair of shoes he had thrown out, she couldn't work out if they were his or Julia's, and now he was going on about how he was such a useless husband, he never gave Julia what she wanted, he never even knew what she wanted. "Did you? She was close with you? She opened up with you, did she tell you things she wouldn't tell me?"

Vishana wasn't sure, possibly, did Mark know about the abortion? How much did he know about Tim? But she didn't want to ask him, she didn't want to tell him about these things now, not if he didn't already know about them, she didn't want to betray Julia, so she changed track, "I was a horrible friend, we hadn't spoken in months, I had a silly vendetta." It felt good to talk about it. Obviously she had to leave out a lot of the details but it still felt good to talk about Julia, it eased the pain, and the guilt, somewhat. Occasionally she said too much - it was the wine and the relief of being able to speak making her too eager with the details - but Mark was drinking more than her and, in that moment, it didn't seem to matter what she told him. He was gushing too.

"I was a horrible husband. The police told me today that she was pregnant. I hadn't even known, she didn't trust me enough to tell me. I feel like I've lost two people, and I didn't know either of them." Vishana was shocked at this news but she accepted it calmly. It was her punishment. She started to cry and so did he. Neither of them really knowing why the other was upset.

When she got home Sam was still at work. All the lights were off and she felt very alone. She had done what she had gone there to do, place the delivery box back in Julia and Mark's home, and now she was exhausted. She sat on the floor of the shower and let the hot water run over her. It was too hot, almost boiling, but she didn't turn it down. After a while, she wasn't sure how long, she got out and wrapped her reddened body up in a fluffy white towel, and lay on top of the bed she shared with Sam. She felt many things but, mainly, relief.

The day Julia had died she had done something really stupid. She hadn't realized how stupid at the time. But emotions, mainly those of jealousy, had got the better of her.

She had the day off work. Which wasn't hard to organise when you worked for yourself - especially at this time of year when most of her clients were lazy. By about mid to late January when they all returned to work and realised they couldn't fit into their trousers and that maybe they overdid it on the trifle, and the gammon, and the cocktails, that's when they would all be clambering to get an appointment.

But for now she had a lull. And she had cancelled the one and only appointment she had for the day so that she could sit on the balcony and watch Julia's place. Sam had gone into work to sort out some things so that he could take time off later in the month without worrying. He said he would probably be home late, and with Sam that meant he would definitely be late and by late he meant close to midnight. So Vishana had the day to herself without worrying about interruption.

And it turned out she had chosen a good day. She had done this, once before, close to Christmas. The last time she had also cancelled on Mrs. Norrish. Poor Mrs. Norrish, she was the only one eager to work throughout Christmas, which Vishana appreciated, but not enough to put her fitness before *this*.

When she had done it the last time it had been very disappointing. Mark was the only person to leave the home. Both Julia and her mother had stayed behind the entire day. But, this time, Mark had gone off early to work and later in the afternoon she had seen Julia's mother leaving in a taxi, with a suitcase, so it didn't look like she would be back soon, she felt a pang of sadness thinking that Julia's mother was leaving and she never got to meet her. They had been so close. Julia soon followed her mother and got into her car with a carrier bag. Vishana guessed that this meant Julia was going shopping, and Julia always took her time shopping, which meant she would have at least an hour. She waited awhile just to make sure Julia didn't come back, having forgotten something. They had been on a run once when Julia had forgotten her water bottle and they had turned back, another time she had claimed to have thought she may have left the stove on. Vishana didn't believe the latter one, she was fairly sure Julia was just tired, when she, jokingly, asked "what make of stove do you have?" Julia couldn't answer.

After enough time had past and she was sure she was gone she went across. She had the spare key.

Julia had given her the spare before they had become friends. She wondered if anyone even knew she had it anymore. Mark may never have known.

Julia and her had seen each other in the street a few times. When they first moved in Julia often went walking around the neighbourhood and Vishana was always on runs. They would greet each other and smile. And then they ran into each other a couple of times in the grocery store. On about the third time Julia made a comment about how healthy Vishana's trolley was. She laughed it off saying something about "just making up for the times Sam does the shopping". Which wasn't really true but she wanted Julia to like her, she seemed nice, genuinely, even if there was a lot of chocolate and quite a few carbs in her basket.

Vishana hadn't really kicked it off with anyone since they had moved into the house after they got married five years ago. When she was a kid they grew up on a street where everybody knew everyone. She played soccer in the road with the other kids and on Eid her mother always got a plate of sugar biscuits from the Muslim family up the road, and some homemade mince pies from the Christian family next door on the first of December.

She was probably over sentimentalizing her childhood but it was a good time in her life. When her and Sam got married and moved into this place it was her first time living away from home. Yes, she came from one of those families where her parents had made her live at home until she was married. Not that she didn't have her own agency. She had a job and her own money, she probably could have moved out if she had wanted to, they would have been cross but they also would have got over it. They always did on the rare occasions that she broke the rules. Like that time she came home from a club blind drunk and threw up in the downstairs loo. Her twin sister had tried to clean up after her but she wasn't much better off. She had thought that night was the worst night of her life. Until she woke up the next morning. As if the hangover wasn't bad enough, she couldn't face her parents and they couldn't face her. They never spoke about it but her dad wrote her a letter and left it on her bed. It was the ultimate "I'm not angry with you, just disappointed" move.

When they moved in Vishana had thought that maybe she was a little bit too over eager to make friends with her neighbours. Sam had told her that people weren't like that anymore, they didn't want to talk to people they didn't know, they didn't even want to make eye contact, "especially in Cape Town," he had said. He was right of course, he was the cool one after all, but she didn't listen. She had a house-warming party and left little slips of paper in everyone's mailboxes both asking them to excuse the noise and to drop by for a drink. None of them did except for the guy that ran the residents association and who, she was pretty sure only came, to try and get her to join. When he saw his "it's fun we take turns patrolling the streets" line was failing to work on her he left.

One of the neighbours even called the police to complain about the noise. Which convinced Vishana that none of them could have checked their mailboxes. It explained both the no-show and the intolerance to the music. But over the next few days, whenever she ran into a neighbour, she found that none of them could look her in the eye when she greeted them.

After that the only person she was able to "befriend" was the guy that ran the smoothie shop down the road, and she was pretty sure he was only as nice to her as he was because she was his number one customer. Sure, she had other friends, not many, but some, growing up with a twin sister had made her lazy. She used to rely on her sister to be her friend or, to make friends for the both of them. But now her friends lived in the suburbs with kids, or back in Joburg, with kids, and she thought it would be nice to have a young, hip, friend, just across the road.

After the housewarming she knew she had to be careful with Julia. She didn't want to come on too strong. She was pleased when a few weeks later Julia knocked on her door, "Sorry, I know this may seem weird, that I know where you live and all, and I don't even think I know your name," she didn't, well at least not the correct one, "but do you think you could keep this spare key for me? I locked myself out the other day when I left my keys at the residents' association meeting."

"You go to those?"

"Not by choice, the guy who runs it is also on the board at our apartment, a man of many committees, and I needed his signature on something, apparently the only time

he could meet me was just as the meeting was starting and he did the whole “seeing as I you’re already here you might as well stay and I will sign it for you, afterwards,” thing”

She had made the first proper move. Which meant the next time Vishana saw her walking at the dog park she could join her. Sure, she had mainly come over to give her the spare key because she was too paranoid to hide a spare key somewhere under a rock or in a plant or something, she had said so, but she had also said that, Vishana seemed, “friendly and trustworthy”. And they shared a dislike of the residents’ association man who Julia called Gary “because he looks like a Gary”. And that was a start.

Of course things had gone awry but Julia had never asked for the key back. She wasn’t the type to. She would have found it too awkward and Vishana kept onto it in hope.

Vishana had only used the key once before when Mark and Julia were away, to go in and check on things, turn off the lights in the passage, turn on some in the lounge, that sort of thing. Other than that it had remained largely unused on top of her electricity box.

She crossed the road, looking left and right, for cars and for witnesses, you never knew when Gary was patrolling, and entered Julia’s two storey apartment. She needed evidence. She couldn’t just keep accusing Sam of having an affair and have him keep laughing it off.

Where to start? The bedroom?

She went up the stairs. But what was she looking for? What could she possibly find? A journal of Julia’s with all her secrets? She knew she didn’t have one of those. Her eyes wandered across the room. A psychologist had told her it might be a good idea to keep one, to write her feelings in, so that she could let them out constructively. But she had flat out refused, laughing about it later to Vishana, “like writing them down would help, that would only give them more power.” But Vishana suspected she didn’t want to do it because if she wrote them down she would have to admit to having them, to acknowledge them to herself and have them made permanent. She was drawn towards her dressing table. A dream journal was also suggested but she refused that too

claiming all of her dreams where panicky nightmares that she didn't want to remember. Expect for the ones that weren't but she didn't want Mark reading about those.

What else? A box of condoms? But those could just as easily be for her and Mark as they could for her and Sam. Sexy lingerie - she had found some in a drawer. But the same thing applied. Of course Julia had sexy lingerie, what else did Vishana expect, she was just the type of person to have the time for it. There was something hard wrapped up in a pair of lacy black panties - a key.

She made her way around the room until she found herself at her bedside table. The drawer was locked. She tried the key from the underwear drawer to see if it would work. It did.

And, in it she found a stack of letters from Tim. If she was going to tell anybody anything it would be Tim. This was probably better than a diary. She lay down on the bed, not bothering to take off her shoes, and settled down to read them. Julia would hate this. It was the ultimate betrayal as far as she was concerned, to read her letters to her brother. Julia spoke about her brother a lot, but very few people knew about him, about their family secret. Vishana did. But this was knowing it all, Julia's most intimate life. She paused before opening the envelope on top of the pile, was she really going to do this? Could she really do this? And, then, she decided, yes, she could, after everything Julia had done to her, forcing herself into the most intimate part of her life, she deserved this.

She was engrossed, her heart beating fast, her hands sweaty, she felt almost manic. So engrossed that when the doorbell rang she jumped. And then she noticed the time. She had been here too long already, she thought, as she absent mindedly walked towards the front door. She tripped slightly and as she caught herself she realized what she was doing and ran into the lounge, but too late, the man at the door had seen her through the passageway window and was moving round to where she was standing. He began to knock on the glass.

"Ms Walters... Ms Walters!" She walked back to the passageway and opened the door, he wasn't going to leave.

"I have your parcel for you, if you could just sign here... and here. Thank you."

"Ah, thanks." This was bad. What was she doing?



And Julia would be home soon. She ran upstairs and hurriedly packed all the letters away, throwing the key back into the underwear draw, before running back down again and across the road. She wasn't even sure if she had locked the door behind her when she slammed it shut.

There was nothing in the letters from Tim about Sam. There was a lot about Julia's mother. And somewhere Tim had commented about how he understood what losing friends was like, and that he was sorry that she no longer had Vishana around to confide in. Vishana felt guilty reading this. But perhaps Julia had just never written to Tim about Sam? There was always the chance he would write back using Sam's name and Mark would read it. So maybe she was erring on the side of caution. Or maybe she had said something about him but he hadn't replied. She only had the letters Tim sent back after all, not the ones she sent him.

That was then, before Julia had died. Now she was feeling a *lot guiltier*.

And worried.

She had read in the paper that they had estimated Julia's time of death according to a delivery man who said he had been at the Walters' house at four-fifty and seen Julia alive. Only, he hadn't seen Julia there and it was only a matter of time before he realized that Julia Walters was a blonde, white woman and not the Indian woman whose signature he had insisted on.

She was sitting inside, watching the police come in and out through the glass doors of Julia's lounge. She was too scared to sit on the balcony and outright gawk. That could only cause unnecessary attention. Her sister kept trying to phone her. She knew she was friends with Julia and had seen the news. She probably just wanted to check in but Vishana didn't feel like the emotional conversation she would have as soon as she heard her sister's voice. She wouldn't be able to hold back, she never could with her, she would be in tears in seconds, and she just didn't feel like dealing with her emotions quite yet. If she could hold them at bay just a little bit longer perhaps they would go away completely. So she sat and watched Julia's front door, ignoring the loud ringing.

The police had been round yesterday but she was out on a run and they had spoken to Sam.

“What did they say?”

“I just told you what they said: they’re doing the rounds, questioning all the neighbours to see if anyone saw anything.”

“And you’re sure they said *all* the neighbours?”

“Yes, why are you being so weird about this?”

“I’m not, I mean she was my friend, after all.”

Today, when Sam got home, she flinched, anything, and everything, set her off at the moment. She was scared of the police and of whatever had happened to Julia.

“Listen, I have to tell you something.” She wasn’t listening, she wasn’t even looking at him, she was staring out of the glass door. “The police phoned me today.” She snapped back.

“How do they have your number?”

“I gave it to them the other day when they were over here. They phoned to set up a time to talk to us. They’re coming over tomorrow.”

“Why? What if I have a client at that time? You don’t know my schedule. What time are they coming?”

“Vish, we’ve been through this, they’re questioning everyone on the block. Don’t worry about it. You’re not in trouble. If you were we would have to meet them at the station... Anyway, I thought I should tell you this now. Because it might come out tomorrow...”

Here it was. He was about to admit to the affair. Either that or he had murdered Julia. Or, perhaps, both.

“Julia was pregnant with my child...”

It was almost worse than she expected.

Sam read her face, “Not recently, many years ago, we met, at a bar. It wasn’t anything serious. She never had the baby.”

“Did you kill her?”

“No!” and then, “ Did you?”

“No.”

“Then why are you acting so weird?”

She gave him the breakdown. Quickly and leaving out a few details.

“So now the delivery man has seen my face, and I’m pretty sure I signed my own signature.”

“Well that’s not great.”

“No, it’s not. None of this is.”

She left the room. “Where are you going?” but she soon returned with a box.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the delivery.”

“You kept the delivery!”

“Yes, well, I didn’t know what else to do with it, if I left it there Julia would wonder who had signed for it.”

“But you have to get rid of it, it’s evidence.”

“Evidence of what? I did nothing wrong. Well, except for breaking in I suppose. But I had a key.”

“What’s in it?”

“I didn’t open it!”

She grabbed the package. She was sad that she couldn’t just be sad about Julia’s death. That she couldn’t linger on these memories of how they had met because she was feeling so much hatred towards herself and how they had left things. And panic about what she had done.

## Josephine

When she got the call from the police “regarding Julia”, the morning after she had landed in Joburg, she had been slightly annoyed at first. It would be just like Julia to get into some sort of trouble when she hadn’t even been away a full twenty-four hours yet.

Then they told her that, “sadly”, her daughter was dead and all her annoyance towards her disappeared.

It was to be shortly replaced with anger at Joan, who wouldn’t stop fussing, and then a worse sort of anger at Mark. Anger was easier. It made it harder to cry and distracted her from sadness. Why hadn’t he called her himself? Why had he waited for the police to call? And why was it that the police, and not a hospital had called?

She spent a few days with Joan before flying back. Joan had insisted saying it would be good for her to “spend time with family” and that “there was nothing she could do in Cape Town anyway” which wasn’t quite true and only made her more irritable and antsy. She wasn’t sure why Joan had taken this approach so intensely, perhaps she thought she was saving Josephine from whatever horrors lay in wait for her, that things would be all cleaned up in Cape Town if they just waited two days.

She hated flopping around Joan’s house “taking it easy” - she needed something to do. She felt helpless stuck so far away from her daughter. She wanted to assist, to make things better, to mother but all she could do was walk around Joan’s house. She felt like a child who was grounded. Joan had taken her ID and hidden it so that she couldn’t jump on a plane. The two days were torture. She couldn’t sleep, she had so much energy but couldn’t use any of it either, all she could do was sit on Joan’s couch.

Mark’s parents had the cheek to phone her and ask her to look after him in their absence. They were away on a cruise and couldn’t get back till the ship docked somewhere. Josephine sensed that maybe they weren’t all that eager to get back all too quickly.

And then, when Joan finally gave her her ID back, she insisted on flying to Cape Town with her. She said Josephine shouldn't be alone but Josephine didn't want to be with Joan.

The two had planned on staying at Julia and Mark's, or just Mark's, but when they opened the door the first thing Josephine noticed was a deep red mark in the wooden floor of the passageway, where the white entrance carpet had been. There must have been a lot of blood to go through the carpet and stain the wood. And Josephine suddenly thought that this was no accidental death. All the pent up emotion she had that had been disguised as anger came out. Sure, she was annoyed at her sister and angry with Mark and his parents but what she really was, was deeply sad and wounded, distraught. She felt like only part of herself. When she was in Joburg she had needed, desperately, to be back in Cape Town, to be with Julia, but now that she was here she didn't feel any closer to her, she could never be any closer to her.

And she understood why Joan had kept her there those few extra days. It was to prevent her seeing things like this when they had looked even worse, when they were fresh.

No one had said it was accidental when they had phoned her. But they hadn't said *what* had happened and Josephine could only assume. And now she was rather cross with herself for not having asked more questions. The passageway, along with everything else, was too overwhelming and she closed the front door and told Joan to book them into a B&B. Mark wasn't there to welcome them but she would phone and leave a message later explaining. Although given his lack of concern for her arrival she wasn't sure she owed him even that.

She hated B&Bs. They were just too quaint. But given that she didn't know how long she would be staying in town, Mark hadn't cared to inform her of the funeral arrangements, she thought she probably wouldn't be able to afford a hotel. The place they were staying in was pink and floral and they had charged Joan R24 for the tiniest pot of honey. She wasn't sure what Joan was buying honey for. But it was still better than the first place they had looked at, which was full of images of the big five, and Josephine didn't have the will to look at a third. It didn't matter what the place looked

like to her, it was the place she was staying at while she waited to bury her daughter, it shouldn't be nice. As soon as their bags were in the twin room and before Joan had a chance to pour herself a gin and tonic, Josephine began to dial the police's number to ask when she could go over to the station and find out just what had happened to her daughter. She needed answers, she couldn't be paralyzed, sitting on a couch, for another two days. She was shocked by the blood and her daughter's cold and empty flat, and she was no longer able to do nothing.

"Who are you phoning?" Joan was paying attention again.

"The police." As soon as she said this Joan took the phone from her and walked into the bathroom and shut the door before Josephine could follow her. This was just like Joan. As the older sister she was forever shutting doors and keeping secrets from Josephine when they had been children. But this time it was about *her* daughter not some silly secret crush. And now she was forced onto her knees, ears pressed to the bathroom door, trying to hear the conversation. It sounded like a lot of "okay"s and "I understand"s.

"So?"

"It's inconclusive."

"What is?"

"The autopsy."

"I don't understand."

She could see Joan was struggling to say something. "It was not an accident, she didn't just fall down the stairs, or something along those lines." But Josephine already knew that.

It had been three days since Joan had spoken to the police over the phone. They weren't too keen on putting Josephine through anymore. They would say there was no new information and hang up, or, if she insisted, they would put her through to the captain only to keep her on hold forever. But she had forever to wait if she had to, she had nothing else to do.

Paul had word that Josephine was back in town and wouldn't leave her alone. He kept delivering chocolates and those awful chrysanthemums of his to the front desk,

and it just wasn't the time for eating chocolates. Joan had an ex boyfriend who would deliver chocolates and letters to her all the time. When she reported it to the police they said there wasn't much they could do, that he hadn't done anything wrong. Everyone thought he doted on her and that Joan was being too harsh. Not long after that he broke into her house and tried to kill her. Everyone had thought that Mark had doted on Julia too.

She had time to stay on hold for hours but she did *not* have time for Paul. She had to concentrate on things that helped Julia. Like finding out how she had died and planning her funeral.

She had come back to find out that Mark had made no plans whatsoever for a funeral. His excuse was "we can't do anything until they release the body, and nobody knows how long that might take". But Josephine wasn't willing to wait months for a body and was planning a memorial for the end of next week. And without Mark's help it was hard. She had met so few of Julia's friend's but she knew she must have friends. She had always spoken about her dinner parties. Only, since she had been down she hadn't had any and the only friends she had met were the boring John and Sarah.

And then there was Julia's father. He was really acting up. The man was in danger of joining a cult. Two days before Julia had died he had gone to see a fortune teller who had told him that she saw lots of flowers in his life, and, low and behold, not a week later people were sending him flowers. The whole house was full of them, all sending their sympathy. He, naturally, saw the way forward after the death of his daughter as following this woman who had given him her warning. He went back to her telling her that everything she had said had come true, "and she didn't even look surprised, Jo", and then he had told her he didn't know where to go from here, and she had said that death was not the end of life but just another part of it. Which Josephine told him was a cliché until he got her to concede that it wasn't too much unlike what Catholicism said. Still, she knew the church would never agree with all this physic nonsense.

He seemed to be seeing this woman rather a lot, from what Josephine guessed at least a couple of times a week, he certainly spoke about her every time she phoned him. Which was daily now. She was worried about the financial implications, she couldn't

imagine physic life advice came cheaply. If the woman had no qualms in making money off lying to a man whose daughter had just died she doubted whether she would have many issues over charging him for it.

“Her name is Ruby.”

“Well no matter what her name is, I hope you aren’t being ripped off.” She knew he was but Trevor could be proud and if she made too much of a thing about it, it would only make him more stubborn. Maybe if she asked him a few questions he would start to think for himself.

“When she says that death is just another part of life, what does she mean? Like another chapter? Like heaven?”

“Er, I suppose, a bit, I think she more means that you get reincarnated in the spiritual realm through travelling outside the body. A lot of it has to do with karma.”

That didn’t sound very Catholic, “Well as long as you don’t try jump on the end of comet Hale-Bopp and get a ride to heaven,” he didn’t laugh. “So you said it’s about karma then?” but how could he believe in karma after what happened to Julia, did he really think she deserved that?

He was coming down in a few days and she was ashamed to admit it but she was looking forward to it. She was ashamed because she had left Trevor after all but she was also, and more so, ashamed because she didn’t want to look forward to anything, she didn’t want positive emotions, or feelings, not at a time like this.



## Vishana

Many months after the thing with Julia when Vishana had been cleared as a suspect, and Mark hadn't, she found herself leaving Sam. She had stuffed a backpack with essentials and waited for him to come home from work and then she had told him she was going. He didn't seem surprised. She had thought he would be the one to leave her. They clearly weren't right for each other. He had kept the fact that he and Julia had a past from her, which was one thing, but he was also clearly upset from the late trauma of the abortion and he hadn't come to her about it, hadn't opened up to her, and, instead, had been walking around in pain, keeping it all in and visiting Julia about it in secret.

And there was what she had done. She thought about this as she packed up another box of kitchenware. She was aware that she was no angel in this. She had completely violated his privacy, not to mention Julia's, she had actually broken into her friend's house to try and prove that her husband was having an affair. And he had just accepted it. They had barely even fought about it. She kept digging, but he wasn't taking the bite. So they lived in peace and quiet for the next few months. Amicable was the best word she had for their relationship. Kitchenware was the worst to pack up because it was all so delicate and she already had one cut on her hand from a dish that had slipped out of her grasp.

She had felt extremely guilty about her actions. They were the actions of a mad person. When she looked back she barely recognized herself. There had even been an article in the paper about Mrs. Walters's crazed neighbor who had broken into her flat on the day she was killed. She wasn't sure why she was no-longer a person of interest, probably because they wanted to try and nail Mark, but she was pretty sure the defense would use her in the trial. She wrapped and re-wrapped another plate in old newspaper from a box of paper Mark had given to her. She didn't really, personally, care if they

broke but she was packing them up for Sam while she did some of her own stuff – she felt bad for the backpack exit and was back to do it properly.

And she was obviously not happy about how she had treated Julia especially given that she couldn't do anything to rectify it now. She still wished Julia had just told her about the history she shared with Sam. Sam had said she didn't want to because she was so scared of losing Vishana as a friend. *He* also used this as his excuse for not telling her, "Julia really didn't want me to, she said she valued your friendship so much, that she had no one else to talk to, and she was scared she would lose you if you knew." Clearly Sam valued Julia and Vishana's relationship more than he did his own with his wife.

She spent a great deal of her time in the aftermath of the death doing Myers Briggs like tests. She was convinced she had some sort of antisocial personality disorder. How could she have done what she did? How did it get so far? She was shocked with herself and quite scared of what was going to happen to her when the police put everything together. She read that a lot of people with antisocial personality disorders were psychopaths and that there was a strong link between psychopathy and crime. One of the symptoms was even paranoia and she had definitely been paranoid!

But perhaps it was just paranoia making her think she was a psychopath? Or did that mean she was a psychopath? She didn't know. Her mind went round in circles.

This sort of thing went on for a while until she got scared that the police might confiscate her laptop and look at her search history which would then plant the idea in their heads that she was a psychopath, if they hadn't already thought of it.

Then the memorial had come round and Sam had been unsure whether or not to go.

"But, when I undoubtedly have to introduce myself to the family, won't they realize who I am?"

"Well, who are you?"

"The man that caused their daughter an abortion and all that trauma. What if I caused her to commit suicide?"

"Oh, that, no. Julia never told her family about that. Only Tim who won't be there, obviously, and maybe Mark, and I highly doubt she told her husband that the

Sam from all those years ago was the same Sam that lived across the road. Don't give yourself so much credit. She wouldn't have done that. Not over you."

"Oh." He sounded almost disappointed.

Vishana was also worried. She wanted to go and pay her respects, to say sorry to Julia for the last time, but she was scared. If Julia's mother had been reading the paper she may put two and two together and realize that she was the "crazed neighbor."

But it turned out Vishana was not the one to be worried. It was Mark who Josephine was set against and she had only nice things to say to Vishana, about how much and how fondly Julia had spoken of her. Which made Vishana feel both a bit happier and a bit guiltier.

She finished up in the kitchen, she had only had one last cupboard in there to go when she arrived this morning, and went on to the bedroom. That would be harder. Everything smelt like Sam.

## Josephine

Josephine wanted things to do between organising the memorial and organising Trevor. She wanted things to do so that she could legitimately tell Paul she didn't have time for him and, so that she couldn't be left with her own wandering thoughts for too long. Thoughts, which would always lead somewhere dark and unwanted. She knew she should probably get round to writing to all her penpals if only to tell them that she wouldn't be writing to them again for a while, given the circumstances.

She got out her address book and note paper, her fancy fountain pen, and then decided, for the first time, in a long time, that she would rather write to her son today. She began with an excuse for the letter, she felt she couldn't just write him a letter for no reason, not after all this time, so she asked him to send all the correspondence he had between himself and Julia to his father who would then forward it on to her by fast track mail. She wanted to go through it for any clues about her daughter's death.

But after her request she found the letter went on. She had a penpal, or two, who also had family members in prison, they had met on a support group website. One of them had a husband who had been convicted of raping a twelve year old girl. She was no longer in contact with him and was now living with the knowledge that her most intimate companion, who she had trusted, had done that to a child. Sometimes she found she couldn't dissociate herself from his crime.

And Josephine felt similar in a way. She felt like she had some responsibility in what Tim had done.

He had been accused and convicted of shooting a woman in the leg. He had got a lot of time because they had claimed it was attempted murder. Tim said he couldn't remember anything given all the drugs he had taken. There were some other guys with him but they had run off and he had been left behind. It could have been one of them. Probably not but he didn't know for certain. The trial was a hard one given that he couldn't really defend himself with his lack of memory. Josephine liked to think he

only did it because he was high, he wasn't *their* Tim in those moments, but she knew herself when she was drunk and even though she may have done things she wouldn't have when sober she had still done them and they were still a part of her. And he had chosen to take those drugs.

She didn't apologise for not writing to him very much, or ever going to see him. Yes, she did those things for herself, and knew they must be hard on him, but she did them because she had to. She had to move on from what he had done in any way that she could. It had been hard for her too. And now she had to process what had happened to Julia any way that she could. And if he felt like she was just using him then that was how he felt, but she was going to write to him anyway.

At the end of the letter she said that perhaps it could be a new start and that she still loved him. Somehow Julia's tragedy had overtaken his and she could forgive the one in the hopes of facing the other.

A month later she had to go to the post office to sign for some registered mail. She expected it might be from her son and she was right. She signed for the parcel that Tim had sent through his father, who had returned after the memorial, to her. Perhaps, she thought, there would be some answers in these letters, her daughter had always been the most open with him. She was, also, quite nervously excited to read a reply from Tim, after all this time. Perhaps they could come together over Julia. She forced herself not to open the parcel in the car park and to wait till she got back to the B&B. But she needn't have.

When she opened the parcel, slicing through the sellotape with a craft knife, and emptied the contents onto her bed, she found there was no new letter from Tim. There were no letters from her daughter either. Instead there were only all the letters she had ever sent her son, including on top, the letter she had sent him a few weeks ago, it didn't amount to a very thick pile. In a sandwich bag underneath were the photos Tim had taken to prison with him but not all of them, only the ones that Josephine was in. She was too late.

She cried and cried. Not moving from her bed until it was dark and Joan came home from the dinner she had gone to and turned on a light. “What’s wrong? Why is it so dark in here?” Joan hadn’t wanted to leave her sister alone to begin with.

“Nothing.” And Josephine promised herself that she would give herself this one day and then she would never cry again. After all, nothing could ever again be worse than what she had been through.

## Roger

It was bad. Very bad.

After Mark had given his alibi claiming he was out on a call at the time of Julia's murder they had checked back in with the office and traced two calls around that time. One of them from Roger's phone. So here he was being questioned by the police and them already knowing all about his and Mark's history *and* his drinking problem.

"So you don't deny you made the call?"

"No." He didn't see any point in denying it. They had the records after all. He was wondering, however, if maybe he should have asked for a lawyer. He had seen on cop shows that often requesting a lawyer before one was charged with anything, or even named a person of interest, could cause you to look more guilty. On the other hand he would rather look guilty than be found guilty.

He had also heard all about cell phone pings and he knew that if they traced the location of his cellphone during the murder it would most likely have pinged off a tower not too far from the Walters' home. Never mind the fact that he lived and worked within a few hundred metres of their home.

"And your alibi for the time of the murder?"

"I don't know what time the murder was." He felt like they were trying to trip him up.

"Between four and seven on Friday. Where were you?"

"I was at home." Passed out.

"Anyone who can collaborate that?"

"No. I live alone."

"Right. No neighbours who might have seen you?"

"I don't know, maybe, you would have to ask them." He certainly hadn't noticed in the state he had been in. In fact, he was finding it pretty hard to concentrate

right now. He had only meant to have one shot of whiskey before his interview, just to calm his nerves. But one had turned into two which had turned into three and so on. He could feel some sweat dripping down his back and his palms were sticky, they left a large, greasy, mark on the glass as he picked it up to sip his water.

“And your relationship with Mark, how was it?” Why were they asking him this? They already knew the answer. They had told him when the interview first begun. He had remembered in another cop show that during interrogations police were allowed to lie to you and they would often do it after listing a whole lot of true facts so that you were more likely to believe them. But that was in American TV shows, surely the laws weren’t the same in South Africa?

“It wasn’t great.”

“And his wife?”

“I only met her once or twice, I think the last time I saw her was over a year ago.” But that was a lie, he had seen her at AA only a few weeks ago. He was gulping down the water now. They were repeating the same questions in a different order. Trying to catch him out? His brain wasn’t working properly.

“Hmm,” they were checking their notes, he had a feeling they didn’t believe him. “And this phone call you made? Why did you choose to say it was a Mr. Evans calling?” He wasn’t listening properly, he was concentrating too much on his body. He had drunk too much water, too fast. They asked him something else. He didn’t hear what.

And then, “are you drunk right now?” the detective asked him. He was shaking slightly and acutely aware of the rising bile in his throat, he tried to reply that he was just nervous but as he opened his mouth to do so he threw up all over the table and half of the notes.

“GET HIM OUT.” But no one wanted to touch him so instead some scary looking men stood around him and glared down at him waiting for him to move. He couldn’t do it. Reluctantly someone dragged him by the arm. Had the police officer said something about him pretending to be Mr. Evans? He hadn’t done that. He had made up some name, Smith, or something. He tried to verbalise this but either he didn’t



do a good job of it or the police were no longer taking him seriously because he found himself outside on the pavement without a second glance his way.

## Faith

Faith blamed Claire. She used to have a collection of photos of each of her ex girlfriends. Claire called them mementos. Faith called them trophies. She didn't see how it was too much unlike those jockey guys who kept a list of everyone they had ever slept with in a little black book, except that maybe it was slightly more artistic. She had the photos all slotted into an album with dates on the back.

When they had first started dating, and for quite a while into it, Claire had had a naked picture of her and her ex lounging on the bank of a dam, up above her bed. Right above where Faith's head was when she slept if she was staying over, to be precise. Faith hadn't said anything for the first few months, she wasn't sure it was her place, but after they had officially named the relationship a relationship she had told Claire she found it upsetting. Claire had responded by saying "don't worry, I don't love her anymore" to which Faith had asked, rather exasperatedly, why she needed to keep it, then? There was a long explanation about how after a couple breaks up one often only remembers the ending and she wanted to remember some of the good from that time, that it wasn't all bad. Faith left it for a bit but when she brought it up again she was accused of being jealous. "You know I can't stand jealous people, not after Melissa wouldn't let me even hang out with other women!" Faith thought it was unfair that she was being blamed for an ex's' actions but she was scared of pushing Claire away.

So when Claire got this new friend at work who she was always talking about and Faith was a tiny bit jealous, but only a tiny bit, she kept it in. Until they had her round for dinner. It had been Faith's idea, she wanted to see the woman and she wanted to dismiss any ideas Claire might have that she was jealous of her by seeming overly okay with it all.

When the woman, Chris, came over she barely touched her meal which Faith had made very carefully and with a lot of trouble. Chris was vegan and Faith found vegetarian cooking hard enough. Personally, she thought the meal tasted pretty good

but hopefully not good enough that Claire would get any more ideas about “taking the next step after vegetarianism”. Worse than that though, was that Chris only spoke to Claire the whole night. Mainly about work which obviously excluded Faith as she didn’t work with the two of them. Faith still tried to join in but even when she did Chris addressed all her comments to Claire and only answered Faith’s questions with one word answers. To be fair Claire did try and include Faith every now and again but eventually she left the table and went to see to Angus while she overheard Chris saying something about how she found it hard to relate to people with children. Did she not realise Angus was just as much Claire’s child?

Afterwards Faith didn’t say too much about it to Claire, she knew she would take it the wrong way, but she did try and casually mention that she found it hard to join in the conversation when all they talked about were their jobs. Claire dismissed this as Chris being a bit socially awkward. And Faith left it at that.

Some time after, they had planned a small dinner party and one of the invited guests couldn’t make it so Claire suggested they invite Chris. Faith pulled a face at this and from there things only got worse.

“You’re always so jealous. Why do you have such an inferiority complex?” Claire had told her how Melissa had made her choose between her and a close friend and how she wouldn’t allow that again. But Faith wasn’t doing that, she just wasn’t too thrilled about spending time with Chris when she made no effort. But she was in no way stopping Claire from seeing her in her own time, without her. She tried not to say this.

When the dinner party came round Claire spent the entire time sulking and Faith found herself wondering how it was that all of Claire’s girlfriends had been jealous types but she had never admitted to jealousy in her life.

Which is what led to her stealing a photo from Julia and Mark’s at her next piano session. She had only really ever had one other proper relationship and that was with Mark and she had nothing to show for it. She took the wedding photo they kept on the mantelpiece, she would have chosen a more appropriate one but she didn’t have much time to snoop around, so she just snuck the photo, frame and all, into her rather

large pleather, she wasn't allowed leather, bag while Julia was distracted at the door talking to a mother and her son.

"I don't have a session available for James now, I'm sorry Emily." Faith snuck around them and waved goodbye mouthing apologies about running out like this. "I will EFT you for today." She couldn't risk hanging around in case Julia noticed the photo was gone while she was there. But Julia never did notice.

When she got home she cut out Mark's head into roughly the size and shape of an ID photo and put it in the front of her wallet, chucking the rest of the photo and the frame into the top draw of their desk. It had been a silly plan which revolved around the hope that the next time Claire opened Faith's wallet to look for some cash she would notice the picture and get jealous when she realised who it was. But it didn't happen that way. Claire who never seemed to have cash on her was often taking a twenty-rand note from Faith's purse to go up the road and buy a lemon, or something, that she was insisting they add to the meal. But she seemed to stop doing this rather soon after Faith put her plan into action. Perhaps they were getting better at grocery shopping?

Claire had started writing lists more often and taking a pencil with to tick things off as they threw them into the trolley. They always did the grocery shopping together as a "family activity", Faith wasn't sure why because it usually meant a few squabbles and the whole thing would take a lot longer because they would have to take Angus with who was forever trying to grab chocolate off the shelves, or tinned tomatoes. She wasn't sure what the tomatoes were about. Faith thought that if they ever let him actually have chocolate he may not do it as much, but she didn't verbalise this.

What Claire didn't verbalise was that she thought Faith was spending too much money on the weekly shop. But when her coming along for the shop didn't seem to help decrease the value of anything she had started with the lists, to make sure they didn't buy anything they didn't need.

So Faith's wallet had gone largely untouched by Claire.

What hadn't gone untouched was their desk. When writing one of these lists Claire had gone to the desk to try and rummage around for a pen, living with a toddler meant these things went missing even more than usual. Faith always thought of it as her desk, because Claire never used it, but technically it was theirs. They had bought it

together for the two of them. It was in Angus' bedroom, which had once been the study, and Faith still sometimes used it to work after hours. Claire had used it, a long time ago, for her sewing machine, when they were getting ready for Angus and she was making baby blankets and things. But she hadn't sewn in a long time.

If Faith had thought she would be sewing again anytime soon she would have been more careful. Faith had a whole pile of clothes next to the desk with loose hems and broken flies. She was always being told to just leave them there and Claire would get to it when she had time. And Faith hadn't complained about it once, not even when Claire had got cross when she suggested she rather take the clothes to a tailor.

It was a week day and Faith was late getting home. When she arrived Claire was sitting in the kitchen. Something in her hand.

"Hi! Sorry I'm a bit late." Claire didn't respond so Faith assumed she was annoyed with her. They had leftover vegetable lasagna from the night before which she took out and turned the oven on to preheat.

"Faith."

"Yes?"

"Why do you have a wedding photo of the woman who was murdered?" She was holding up the other half of the photo she had stolen and thrown into a draw of the desk. Why hadn't she thrown it away properly?

Now didn't seem like a good time to go into the fact that Julia's husband was the Mark from her past, her ex. Or that she had taken the photo so that she could keep a picture of him in her wallet. "She was my piano teacher?"

"You never told me that, we were watching a news bulletin about her just the other night. And why do you have her wedding photo? With her partner cut out."

"Er, she was unhappy in the marriage, she tore it up, I picked it up off the floor to keep it, in case she changed her mind, she was acting quite rashly."

"How close were you?"

"I guess we were sort of close." Faith answered truthfully thinking of the afternoon they had got drunk together.

"I think you should go to the police, and tell them that she didn't have a happy marriage, it could be evidence. Take this photo with you."

“Um, okay, sure.” She didn’t know what else to say. Had she got away with it?

About a week later Claire found the photo once more. Faith didn’t know what was wrong with her, why had she failed to throw it away again? She had sort of tried to but she had felt a bit strange throwing away the wedding photo of her murdered piano teacher. She should have at least hidden it better, she thought, in retrospect.

“Why have you not taken this to the police yet?”

“I haven’t had time.”

“If you don’t take it, I will. Which will only make you look suspicious.”

That Saturday, out of fear, Faith went with Claire to the police station. When they got there she thought she would at least be able to speak to a detective alone but Claire came in with her and kept adding to the story. All Faith wanted to say was “Julia Walters threw this away.” But Claire kept interjecting, “Tell him why she threw it out – she threw it out because she was having problems with her husband. She told Faith once that he was putting a lot of pressure on her to have children, right Faith?”

“Ah, well...” She couldn’t help but feel this interview was not going to help Mark’s chances. Plus, if they found out she had known Mark and had kept that from him she could be in trouble. With the law and with Claire. And she had *known* Mark, intimately. She doubted whether he could have killed his wife, not like this, not like the papers reported it, with blood everywhere.

He was always so gentle and mild mannered. There was one night that was different but she hardly ever thought about that night anymore. She had been unable to sleep properly for a few months afterwards and they had even fought about it. But he had been protecting her. She was asleep on the couch, she had been napping a lot, unaware that she was pregnant, and always feeling tired. Her housemate was away and Mark had moved in for a week, taking advantage of having the house to themselves. He was sitting in the tiny garden, reading and having a drink, it was a hot summer’s night and neither of them had work the next day. She slept through most of it until the man fell through the sliding door and the crash of glass woke her up. His face and bare arms were bleeding and Mark was walking towards him ready to punch him. Faith had

screamed and as the guy tried to stumble to an upright position Mark punched him down again, and again, even when the man was clearly out.

Faith was overwhelmed by the violence of it all and she told Mark how upsetting she had found it. He didn't understand why. She could understand that he was trying to protect her, but she should have been upset with the intruder not scared by her boyfriend. She had never seen that violent side of him, and she never saw it again.

## Mark

Mark got an invitation to his own wife's memorial. It was actually just an email followed up with a call from Joan but it still felt bizarre.

"Why are you phoning me?"

"Well, I thought you should know."

"No, I mean why are *you* and not Josephine phoning?"

"Oh, she's very upset." But she hadn't been too upset to phone Vishana and let her know about the memorial three days before anyone contacted Mark.

It was on a Friday. In the Catholic church Saturdays were reserved for weddings and Sundays were God's day. It was in the hall attached to the church and not the church itself as the funeral was still to come, when they got the body back. Mark hated to think of Julia's cold body, lying on a metal table in a morgue somewhere while someone tried to prove that he had murdered her.

When he got there the first two rows were taken up. Nobody had saved him a seat. So sat down in the third row, he debated sitting at the back but thought he was her husband after all, he was allowed to be there. And, it might look suspicious if he wasn't. When Vishana and Sam arrived he nodded at them, Vishana pointed at a seat a few rows back, he shook his head until she came over.

"We can't sit this far in the front, that's for family, we'll just sit over there," she nodded back at Sam. She seemed nervous.

"Please sit here, you were basically her best friend, and I need someone next to me." She sat down, reluctantly and beckoned to Sam. He didn't move.

Joan hadn't asked him to read anything, she hadn't even asked if he had wanted to but after she and Josephine had spoken and the priest looked like he was about to wrap things up Mark took his chance and walked up. They looked a bit shocked so he told the priest he was the husband and he moved over. As Mark read the poem, it was the same poem Julia had read at their wedding, he looked out at the people there. There



were people from Julia's past that they hadn't seen in years and people he had only met once or twice, including Trevor right in the front. No one in the front row was looking at him. Joan, Josephine and Trevor all had their heads down.

Outside at the "tea" he ended up speaking to Paul, the only person Josephine was avoiding more than him. Vishana came over saying they were leaving.

"Do you want a ride?"

"I haven't spoken to the family yet." Now was as good a time as ever. He walked up behind Josephine so that she couldn't try and dodge him. She turned around and her expression of sadness changed to one of annoyance.

"Hello." She greeted him coolly. She was obviously still cross that he hadn't organized this himself, but he had been in too much shock, he wished she would understand that, that it wasn't some sort of sign that he didn't care about his wife.

"Thank you for organizing this, Josephine."

"Yes, well, I thought someone should, we had to say goodbye somehow."

Trevor was walking up to them, "Hello" he said and shook Trevor's hand, he shook it back. "Can we talk sometime, all of us?"

"Yes, yes, of course." But he could tell she was lying, she was brushing him off and trying to get rid of him as quickly as possible by pretending to agree.

He turned to Trevor, "Where are you staying?"

"Oh, at the same B&B as Joan and Josephine," Josephine was glaring at her husband.

"Okay, I will call you." He shook Trevor's hand again and turned to kiss Josephine on the cheek, but something caught his eye, "what are you wearing? Those are Julia's." They were the diamond studs he had bought her, the only thing that was in anyway sort of still leaning the police in the slightest into believing it could possibly have been a break-in. Why did she have them, Julia would have never lent them to anybody. He said as much.

"Well she lent them to me, I am her mother." She looked very angry and she walked away to Joan shaking her head and pointing back at him.

“Do you want a lift home?” Vishana asked him again, kindly, while Mark avoided Sam’s gaze from behind her.

“No, I think I will walk.” It seemed like the appropriate thing to do after a sad day. A way to think about his feelings. The church wasn’t close to the flat and the longer he walked the more lost in thought he became. As he walked under a bridge someone came up behind him aggressively asking for his wallet. And he gave it to them. He wondered to himself, “Have I just been mugged?” but he wasn’t sure. He felt nothing, no adrenaline, no fear, nothing.

## Josephine

Josephine was thinking of going back. Trevor was already there waiting for her. They weren't sure if they would stay in Orlando though. Trevor wanted to. But Tim would be out on parole soon and she wasn't sure if she wanted to be involved in that, if she could stand to be the household he came home to every evening after working at McDonalds. That was the story she told both herself and Trevor, but, really, she knew that Tim wouldn't be choosing to come home to her house and she couldn't face that.

She would leave soon, as soon as they released the body. She didn't want to stay around for the trial. She was sure they would arrest Mark and, if she got any say, she would say no if they asked her to testify. For either side. At the memorial she had tried to avoid him but he had come over and cornered her, Trevor grinning and shaking hands like nothing was wrong. Trevor still wasn't convinced he had done it, it had been the same with Tim, and look at what had happened there. Trevor clearly wasn't a good judge of character. He was still calling his psychic even with the exorbitant price of long distance calls. She was almost jealous. Almost.

Mark had said almost nothing to them at the memorial and then accused her of stealing Julia's earrings. She had taken them, yes, that day she had gone back to their home, the only day she had been back, and seen the blood stained floor. Julia had been wearing them when she had left, that last day, for the airport, but she must have taken them off because there they were in the pot-plant when she looked. She had taken them because Julia had loved them and because she wanted to be close to her. And because Julia wouldn't have wanted them going to anyone else, she wouldn't even let anyone try them on when she was alive. So she had taken them to protect them for her daughter, before anyone else could. She always hid them in a little pouch in the pot-plant in the hallway. Mark should have known that, it wasn't her fault he had reported them as missing. If she had known Mark had bought them for Julia she might not have taken them and probably wouldn't have worn them to the memorial either.

She was thinking of selling them at a pawn shop now. The association had been tainted. And she had the Christian Louboutins to remind her of Julia anyway. Joan had gone back to the flat to get them for her. She had loved those just as much. She would wear them to remind her of her daughter. Or maybe just look at them, she wasn't sure she could wear heels like that. They would be much too impractical for her lifestyle. Fine for her daughter's but not for hers.

She hadn't cried at the memorial. She had promised herself she wouldn't and she hadn't. No more tears. The time for being practical had come. Nothing could be worse than what she had experienced in her life, with Tim and in the last few days, so there was no point in crying over it. Her life had ended up completely off track but she was tired of crying. She wouldn't be weak. Trevor and Joan needed her. The rest of the guests could think she was uncaring, it didn't matter to her, and if they only looked elsewhere they would notice that Mark hadn't shed a tear either.

How could he have not organized or not, even, helped in planning his own wife's memorial? And then he had still come, the cheek of it, thought Josephine, although she knew that if he hadn't come she might be even more cross.

And Tim, stuck in jail had missed both his sister's wedding and her funeral.

## **Mark**

He found a box in the kitchen addressed to Julia. He opened it and a fancy looking scarf was inside. He guessed it must have been his Christmas present to her. After she had received the dishwasher he had felt a bit bad, it was rather a boring present and it benefitted him almost more than her. So he had told her to order herself something with his credit card. And here it was. He put it on and wore it around the house. But it didn't smell like her. It was too new.

## **Julia**

She couldn't remember who had done it but as far as she saw it, it could only really be one of six people. She didn't really mind so much anymore that it had happened, but she felt sad for those still there.

There was both Roger and there was Faith. They had a lot of anger. Perhaps, Roger had really had enough of Mark and his seemingly perfect life with his beautiful wife. He had almost no alibi. He wasn't even sure himself what he had done that afternoon. It had seemed like he had just passed out in his bed, at least that was where he woke up, but he wasn't entirely sure what he had done after the phone call he had made to Mark. And if he had been resentful of Mark enough to phone him and go through with that stupid prank then who knows what else he had planned. Maybe he had gone over there to plead with Julia not to tell anyone about what he had said at AA. And things had gone awry?

While Faith remembered the day it happened well. She and Claire had both had the day off from work and they had taken Angus to the park. She had let Angus take his shoes off and run around with some of the bigger kids, only he had stepped on a bottle lid and started screaming. "You're never around, and when you are you don't know what to do," rang in Faith's ears as she stormed off away from Angus and Claire.

Later they had all met back at the apartment and made up. "Forgive me, Faith, I'm a bad person," Claire told her. To which Faith said that she would forgive her although she hated it when she tried to turn herself into a victim, being "a bad person" was not an excuse to do bad things. It didn't make it okay.

Claire hadn't known where Faith had gone in the hours between the park and home and although Faith told her she had found the photo in Julia's trash and told herself she had only taken it to make Claire jealous, what if she had taken it out of a deep jealousy for Julia? What if she had seen the two blue marks on the stick Julia had

peed on a few minutes previously, just before Faith had come round for her lesson, Julia, using the guest bathroom because she knew Mark never went in to it and neither did her mother.

But the police had said that the house had been locked, and although Julia probably would have let those two people in how would they have locked it when they left? It was possible but probably more likely that someone with a key had done it.

Like Vishana. Maybe she, too, had found the pregnancy test and perhaps she had suspected the father was Sam? If she had been irrational enough to break in in the first place then who knew what she might have done if Julia had come home as she found it and was drawing conclusions. Had she seen Julia coming up the road just as the delivery man left, and, in a panic, had hid in the lounge?

There was Vishana's husband Sam, but she didn't really include him, he barely featured.

So that left the other people with keys. No one knew what time Josephine had actually left for the airport besides Julia, and secretly, Vishana. Sure, she was usually quite pedantic about these things and even when flying locally would get there at least two hours before. But one never knew. She had taken Julia's earrings which she said she had found in their hiding place but Mark had said he had seen them on Julia earlier that day. Perhaps they had fought, again.

Mark was the obvious choice. All things pointed to him. His alibi was weak, for one, he had lied and he *was* the husband. The police had the odd photo from Faith that didn't point to the best marriage if Mark or Julia *had* thrown it away. Josephine didn't think their relationship had been as good from the inside as she had always thought it had been from the outside and Vishana knew all the little secrets she wasn't telling him so who knew what he wasn't telling her. Had he thought the fetus wasn't his?

There was the option of a stranger. They had caught someone with a photo of Julia but that could have been from the wallet of Mark's that was stolen.

And, then, there was Julia herself. She didn't think it could have been her. But she had thought about it before. It had always been something she could do if things got too bad, a way out without the help of anyone else.

Some had wondered, for a short moment, if maybe they had all been invited over that evening to see Julia one last time. That she had planned it that way, that she had even thought of the raincoat to save them the mopping up. It could explain the locked doors too. Only, why would she do that? And what about everyone she was leaving behind? If she killed herself she would never see Tim free again and would she risk Mark's freedom too?

Trevor had phoned up Ruby and she had said, "It was somebody close".

"Do you mean close like close by? Or close in relationship?"

"Whichever," she said.

But he wasn't close enough in either respects for Julia to consider him. She could see now who was and who wasn't.

Then he asked Ruby about the raincoat but not even she could answer that.

The police were left with loose ends and not enough information, as is so often the case. The others were left empty and wondering. And Julia, Julia didn't have to worry anymore. The rest was up to them.